



# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY SUMMARY (2024-2029)

In March 2023, the Vernon County Economic Development Committee formed a sub-committee to focus on the process of updating our Economic Development Strategy for the term 2024-2029. A Request for Proposals (RFP) was released in May, and seven consultants submitted a proposal. The sub-committee selected three qualified consultants to interview and proposed a hybrid selection to the full committee in June. Their recommendation was to innovatively partner with two consultants, Place Dynamics, and Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission (MRRPC), to develop a multi-view strategy that will best define economic development needs throughout the county. Each consultant was tasked with specific objectives:

- Place Dynamics was contracted to focus on the following objectives: 1) market research, 2) conduct business and community surveys, and 3) use this research to recommend goals and objectives.
- MRRPC was contracted to focus on the following objectives: 1) support and retain current business, 2) skilled workforce development and youth retention, and 3) associated economic and community factors required for items 1 and 2.

After six months, both consultants presented strategies that included extensive market research, community data, and recommended goals and objectives for Vernon County.

The Economic Development Committee reviewed both strategies and determined the need to combine similar goals (from both plans) to narrow the strategic focus. The committee identified four key goals with related objectives to implement over the course of five years. While the objectives are listed under the most relevant goal, many will contribute to the success of the other goals. The committee recommends the implementation of the following strategic summary to help shape our vision for economic development and position our area as an ideal place to live, work, and play.

## Economic Development Priority Goals:

### ➤ Support Business and Entrepreneurship

- Enhance current support of local business expansion and retention.
  - Systemize business visits, fostering understanding and goodwill while identifying opportunities and challenges.
  - Create opportunities for business networking and shared learning (ex. Vernon County Awards Banquet).
  - Connect businesses with grants and other financial resources.
  - Collaborate with UW-Madison Extension, Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission, WEDC, VEDA, WHEDA, WTC, SBDC, and others to offer workshops/trainings on how to enhance daily business operations (ex. strategic planning, website development, accounting/financial management, writing a business plan for expansion, market trends, marketing, etc.).
- Attract and support new business startups and entrepreneurship.
  - Work closely with key leaders across communities to maintain an inventory of available sites for new construction or renovation. Display on website.
  - Support new business ideas and direct potential developers to professional resources within the County.

- Build awareness and offer guidance for the Economic Development Loan and other financial resources.

### ➤ **Establish County Economic Development Leadership**

- Hire a Vernon County Economic Development Coordinator to oversee the goals and objectives outlined in the Economic Development Strategy.
- Define the scope of work for the position, including annual performance targets.
- Provide necessary resources and support for county-wide Economic Development efforts.

### ➤ **Attract and Retain Workforce**

- Support workforce development and training.
  - Work closely with educational institutions to bridge the skills gap and align education with workforce needs (i.e. identify skills gap and recommend programs to WTC and local high schools).
  - Facilitate connections between employers and educational programs, incorporating initiatives like apprenticeships, internships, entrepreneurship, and job shadowing.
  - Collaborate with UW-Madison Extension, chambers, business associations, and educational institutions to offer workshops (ex. Inventors & Entrepreneurship Club, How to Start Business, etc.).
- Increase affordable housing stock.
  - Coordinate and support a county-wide housing task force (gather and present data, conduct survey, and facilitate meetings).
  - Establish strong collaborations with communities, developers, and organizations like Couleecap to plan for housing/affordable housing projects and identify available land and funding sources to support those initiatives.
- Support childcare facilities.
  - Coordinate and support a county-wide childcare task force to expand affordable childcare (gather and present data, conduct survey, and facilitate meetings).
- Initiate outreach to Vernon County's work-from-home community to learn about their needs.

### ➤ **Promote Vernon County as an Ideal Place to Live, Work, and Play**

- Implement a branding campaign for Vernon County to position our area as an ideal place to visit, live, and work.
- Collaborate with local and regional tourism entities, chambers, and business associations to promote events and unique characteristics of Vernon County (ex. Vernon County Visitor Guide, county-wide trail master map/plan, county-wide wayfinding signage plan).
- Enhance and streamline media presence (social media, website, radio/tv, etc.) to highlight economic development initiatives and recreational/cultural opportunities throughout Vernon County.
- Promote quality of life to attract remote workers (extensive rural fiber network), highlight access to first-rate healthcare and our high-quality schools.
- Collaborate with regional tourism stakeholders to support agritourism (ex. regional wine and cheese tour, farmer's market tour, Amish greenhouse tour).

- Engage local, regional, and state economic development and elected officials in our work and invite more community involvement in Economic Development.

## **Economic Development Strengths and Assets of Vernon County, WI**

The plans identified county strengths which include a successful economic development team, cooperative and innovative culture, quality of life and tourism assets, broadband coverage, vibrant arts community, diverse agriculture, good schools and healthcare, and natural beauty and environmental quality.

## **Economic Development Challenges in Vernon County, WI**

The plans identified key challenges which include lack of affordable housing and childcare availability, workforce shortages, the need for a stronger county-wide and regional tourism presence, limited economic development support from local government leaders, attracting external investment, and the need for formalized coordination of economic development support activities.

## **Economic Development Indicators of Success:**

- **As determined and tracked by the Vernon County Resource and Community Development Department:**
  - Number of business visits annually
  - Number of grants submitted and awarded
  - Number of hosted or sponsored events and attendance at each
  - Annual Economic Development Survey feedback from businesses and community leaders
  - Website traffic and social media followers
- **County data measured, tracked, and shared by reputable third-party sources (ex. WEDC, WI DOA, WI Dept of Tourism, WI Dept of Revenue, US Dept of Housing & Urban Development, etc.):**
  - County sales tax disbursement
  - County Room Tax
  - Tourism economic impact
  - Labor participation rate
  - Unemployment rate
  - Median and mean household income
  - Number of new businesses in the County and number who closed
  - Population/change
  - Households/change
  - Household Income

This Economic Development Strategy Summary was reviewed and endorsed by Place Dynamics and the Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2024, and by the Vernon County Economic Development Committee on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024. The Vernon County Board of Supervisors adopted this strategy on February 15, 2024.



**RESOLUTION #2024-08**

**2024-2029 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**

**WHEREAS**, the Vernon County Board of Supervisors recognizes the need for economic growth and resiliency; and

**WHEREAS**, an adopted Economic Development Strategy provides a vision and commitment to economic development and is advantageous for future grant applications in seeking funds to support the implementation of economic/community development initiatives; and

**WHEREAS**, the Economic Development Committee contracted with Place Dynamics and Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission to create the 2024-2029 Economic Development Strategy, based on their assigned objectives; and

**WHEREAS**, the Economic Development Committee determined the need to develop a summary that encompasses the similar strategic goals and objectives of both strategies; now therefore be it

**RESOLVED**, the Vernon County Board of Supervisors adopts the 2024-2029 Vernon County Economic Development Strategy Summary as presented by the Economic Development Committee and as supported by the strategies created by Place Dynamics and Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission.

Submitted to the County Board for consideration on this 1<sup>st</sup> day of February, 2024.

*Kay Stanek*

Aye: 8 Nay: 0 Absent/Abstain: 1 absent

Kay Stanek, Economic Development Committee Chair

**VERNON COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:**

Aye: 17 Nay: 0 Absent/Abstain: 2

I, J. Pedretti, County Clerk of Vernon County, Wisconsin DO HEREBY CERTIFY that the above is a true and correct copy of the action taken by the Vernon County Board of Supervisors at the meeting of February 15, 2024, as indicated in transcription taken personally by me.



*J. Pedretti*

02/15/2024

/s/ J. Pedretti, Vernon County Clerk

(Seal)





# VERNON COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY REPORT

**Prepared by Place Dynamics for the Vernon County  
Economic Development Committee**

**FEBRUARY 15 2024**



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# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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Vernon County's Economic Development Strategy is intended to guide County-led investments to diversify and expand economic opportunities both county-wide and in individual municipalities. Recognizing that many of its small communities may not have the capacity to undertake projects on their own, the County may play different roles in leading or supporting various initiatives, and in working with a wide range of partners.

## Planning approach

The Economic Development Strategy was prepared under the supervision of Vernon County's Economic Development Committee. Place Dynamics LLC was retained to conduct the research and work with the committee to craft the strategy, which was recommended by the Committee and approved by the Vernon County Board of Supervisors on February 15<sup>th</sup> 2024.

Stakeholder engagement was an important element of the planning process, with multiple individual meetings and small focus groups, and a community survey conducted to test potential strategies.

Extensive market research served to identify issues and opportunities, and provide a context for strategies related to general community and economic development, industry, commercial development, tourism, and agriculture. This analysis is summarized in a series of appendices to this strategy.

## Vision and values

Stakeholder engagement and input from the Economic Development Committee resulted in

several statements reflecting the overall direction and long-term vision for economic development in Vernon County.

- Family farms and small businesses are highly valued cornerstones of the economy.
- Development should respect the county's geography and natural resources.
- Vernon County is a welcoming community that supports entrepreneurship and innovation.
- Tourism development should enhance local quality-of-life and provide meaningful opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment.

## Challenges

Interviews with business and community leaders from across the county revealed a consensus around several economic development challenges.

- Organizing and coordinating economic development activities across the county can be difficult, especially where local communities lack professional staffing, and technical and financial resources to dedicate to initiatives.
- There is a need to develop a stronger tourism presence county-wide, reach a broader market, and convert visits to spending prospects for local businesses.
- Housing and childcare availability and affordability are significant impediments to workforce availability.

- Workforce shortages are impacting schools and businesses.
- There is a need to provide greater support for entrepreneurs and small businesses, to help them achieve success.
- Like most rural parts of the country, Vernon County has not attracted significant interest as a location for investment from businesses outside of the county. Past investments to create business parks have so far been largely unsuccessful in attracting development.
- Residents place a premium on protecting the county's natural resources, while building resiliency to withstand future economic disruptions.
- Vernon County's investments in broadband infrastructure have resulted in coverage throughout much of the county, including rural areas. This is a significant advantage over adjacent counties.
- There is a thriving music and art community, as well as multiple arts and culture venues throughout the county, attracting visitors to the area.
- The county has a variety of educational and health care options, attractive to both younger and older households.
- The Driftless Area is considered one of the most scenic parts of the Upper Midwest. Vernon County has several attractive small communities set amid a landscape of farms and natural areas.

## Strengths and assets

Economic development leverages local assets to achieve goals. Vernon County has some significant assets, identified through interviews with business and community leaders from across the county.

- The county has an existing, successful economic development team, supported by a network of local, county, and state partners.
- There is a history and culture of cooperation and innovation in Vernon County, dating back to at least the birth of the watershed restoration movement.
- The county offers an exceptional quality of life (low crime, great schools) and tourism assets (including but not limited to state and county parks, trails, rivers, and hunting and fishing resources)
- Local businesses, including banks and key industries, are committed to economic development.
- The county's diverse agricultural sector is on the leading edge of sustainable food production. Many farms are engaged in value-added production, agritourism, or farm market operations such as community supported agriculture.

## Goals and strategies

The Economic Development Strategy is organized around six goals with related objectives and strategies. While the strategies are listed under the most relevant goal, in fact, many can contribute toward more than one goal. These strategies build off significant progress made in implementing the recommendations of the 2017 Economic Development Strategy.

### GOAL 1

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#### Continue to strengthen county-wide economic development programs and initiatives.

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Current economic development staffing related to economic development includes a contracted position reporting to the Tourism, Promotion, and Economic Development and Committee. Vernon County Economic Development Association is an entirely separate organization with a full-time director. As a partner organization, it fills a defined need for economic development in the county, with little overlap with other organizations. Vernon County is also a partner with Crawford County in Driftless Wisconsin, a tourism initiative with part-time staffing. The following recommendations are intended to help the County organize effectively for economic development.

**Objectives.** The following objectives will guide how economic development is organized in Vernon County.

- 1.A. Provide adequate staffing to coordinate and lead economic development activities across the county. To attract and retain qualified economic development staff, the economic development position will need to offer competitive

compensation and on-going professional development. Typical compensation includes benefits such as health insurance, paid time off and sick leave, and retirement contributions. Professional development may include paid registration and travel for state or regional economic development conferences and training such as classes to obtain or maintain professional certifications.

- 1.B. Explore the potential for establishing a stronger partnership with VEDA in order to leverage the public-private economic development partnership which already exists, rather than start something new and potentially duplicative.
- 1.C. Evaluate the potential for establishing a new Vernon County Economic Development Corporation (Vernon County EDC). Many counties across the state utilize a public private partnership model to organize and execute their economic development initiatives. The partnership model allows local governments to leverage funding and accelerate economic development through private investment and partnerships with the county's cities, villages, and towns.
- 1.D. Utilize contract employees with specific knowledge to supplement regular staff. The recommended economic development initiatives are broad and it is unlikely that any one person will have the knowledge or time necessary to implement them all. Contracted services can be used to fill the gap, and might include agreements with individuals, companies, or organizations. Driftless Wisconsin is an example of

contracting with an organization to promote tourism, leveraging resources to promote visitation to the region.

- 1.E. Support the economic development needs of Vernon County's local municipalities. Most of the county's cities, villages, and towns do not have paid full-time staff devoted to economic development. County-led economic development can assist these communities by continuing to provide funding and technical support.
- 1.F. Develop an effective communication strategy. It is critically important that the economic development function be transparent and recognized within and outside of the county. Internal audiences include businesses, local community leaders, and residents. External audiences include the larger economic development community, regional media, businesses, and potential investors.

**Actions.** Vernon County will need to define its best approach to organizing for economic development. Currently, economic development is staffed through a contract employee and partnerships with organizations that address a specific set of issues. The new recommendations in this strategy should prompt the County to reconsider this approach, even if only to redefine the goals of the existing contract position and partner relationships.

- 1.1. **Evaluate strategy recommendations to determine the best position or partner to implement them.** The Economic Development Committee should review recommendations in this

document and other economic development programs, administrative functions, and initiatives, to determine the staffing or partner organization best able to manage them. See the diagram provided as an example.

- 1.2. **Investigate approaches used by other counties.** The Economic Development Committee should meet with other county economic development directors and specialists, such as from the UW-Extension or the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation's Region 3 Economic Development Director, to learn about organizational approaches used elsewhere.
- 1.3. **Establish a formal organizational structure.** This task might include steps to create a position within County administration or to establish an economic development corporation, and negotiating contractual relationships with partners.
- 1.4. **Continue to support county-wide and regional economic development partners.** These include the UW-Extension, VEDA, Driftless Wisconsin, and the 7 Rivers Alliance. Partnerships should clearly identify the goals to be achieved through collaboration, resources to be dedicated, and expected outcomes from investment.
- 1.5. **Create opportunities for business networking.** Examples include the Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club and events held by partners such as the Chamber of Commerce. The



County economic development role may include hosting new events or partnering with others to provide sponsorship or technical support for networking and learning events.

1.6. **Communicate economic development priorities, success stories, and resources.** Several tasks might fall under this action.

- Adopt an annual work plan that clearly communicates the actions that will be taken, and the goals hoped to be achieved, in the context of a long-term strategy.
- Create an economic development dashboard to monitor metrics indicating economic conditions within the county, and benchmark against other places. Various data sources can be used that are updated on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis.
- Establish a new Vernon County economic development website. This should clearly communicate strategic plan initiatives, educational opportunities, and economic development resources to internal audiences, and provide current and complete information to potential investors inside or outside of the county.
- Develop a social media presence. Social media should be added to on at least a weekly basis and be used to report economic development

happenings from around the county.

- Publish a monthly newsletter highlighting county economic development activities, trends, and resources. This can be distributed by building an email contact database. The newsletter can also serve as a monthly report to the Board of Supervisors.

1.7. **Engage local, regional, and state economic development and elected officials.** These people provide access to resources or craft policies that may address local needs. Outreach can include inviting them to meetings, events, or business tours to educate them on county priorities. Develop an annual calendar of visits with the goal of sharing the county's Economic Development Strategy, and discussing partnership opportunities and resources available to implement the plan.

1.8. **Maintain regular interaction with local government leaders to ensure that the needs of the county's communities are being met.** Plan to meet no less than twice a year with professional staff and/or elected officials from the county's towns, villages, and cities. This should include a combination of visits, attendance at government meetings, and events hosted for local officials. These interactions can communicate economic development goals and initiatives at the county level, learn the needs of local municipalities, and explore opportunities to partner with local units of government, businesses, and volunteer organizations to achieve

local development goals. These can also be used to educate local leaders about programs available to support economic development at the municipal level, such as tax increment financing (TIF), business improvement districts (BID), and as county, state, and federal loan or grant opportunities.

## GOAL 2

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### Grow the tourism economy while enhancing local quality of life.

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Tourism is one of the county's targeted industries, drawing visitors whose spending augments the sales of many retail, dining, and hospitality businesses, and creates business opportunities for those directly serving the tourism market. There are many opportunities to expand the county's tourism resources and link them to regional assets. Doing so creates a greater pull for visitors from a market including all of Wisconsin, northern Illinois (including Chicago), eastern Minnesota (including Minneapolis) and eastern Iowa.

Current marketing includes a largely uncoordinated combination of regional, countywide, and local area print and web-based approaches. There is a need for better integration across local, county, and regional efforts, and to improve the quality of marketing assets.

- 2.A. Provide an organizational structure for tourism development and promotion, that is effective, responsive to varied stakeholders, and avoids duplication.
- 2.B. Provide marketing resources in a variety of formats (ex., website, social media, mobile application, print), that are relevant to visitor interests,

current and detailed in content, and easily accessible.

- 2.C. Create an on-site infrastructure to support tourism visits, including directional signage, places where information can be found, and assets to support the visit.

**Actions.** Organization is once more a critical element in attaining this goal. Current efforts are disjointed, with insufficient interaction between key stakeholders. Many of these partners have limited resources, and the result – particularly in marketing – often falls short of industry standards. Consolidating efforts can result in more effective messaging and improved prospects for asset development.

- 2.1. **Evaluate current local, county, and regional tourism promotion entities and assess opportunities to use limited resources more effectively through consolidated efforts.** This might include more than one organization, but with differing roles. One organization may focus on developing the county's tourism assets, while another may lead marketing efforts. A more cohesive approach to marketing could be achieved in concert with a continued (and possibly expanded) partnership with the Driftless Initiative. Asset development could fall under the County's economic development organization, which has closer ties to other functions (such as parks or transportation) tied to asset development. The functional separation of activities can help each organization to hire dedicated staff with the appropriate technical expertise.
- 2.2. **Building off of an anticipated successful partnership to**

**produce a 2024 Vernon County Tourism Guide, re-establish a tourism council of tourism-related businesses and other stakeholders from throughout the county.** This organization can have an advisory role in crafting asset development and marketing strategies, and supplement the role of paid staff in outreach to the tourism community.

- 2.3. **Ensure continuing financial support for tourism promotion.** This can include a mix of lodging tax dollars, county and municipal support, state grants, and paid sponsorships. Local lodging taxes can be imposed on both traditional hotels and short-term rentals, and the funds earmarked for tourism promotion. The tourism organization may assist local municipalities in preparing and adopting ordinances requiring payment of a lodging tax.
- 2.4. **Embrace a regional approach to tourism.** This might include using Driftless Wisconsin to conduct tourism marketing for the county, leveraging its existing staffing, online presence, and other resources. A regional approach recognizes that attractions outside of the county bring visitors with a similar market profile, who could be converted to visitors to Vernon County.
- 2.5. **Develop an overall brand identity for Vernon County.** A branding study is planned in 2024 in partnership with UW-Extension. As part of the branding effort, tourism partners should identify how to best incorporate the results of the study into all tourism initiatives, including whether to maintain, modify, or

discontinue use of the Naturally Vernon brand.

- 2.6. **Organize tourism around themes such as outdoor recreation, the Great River Road, paddling the Kickapoo or other rivers, motorcycle touring, and Amish/Mennonite culture.** Develop detailed route maps and guides for these activities.
- 2.7. **Develop a Vernon County Visitor Guide.** Partner with local chambers, business groups, tourism operators, and municipalities to prepare a print and web version of a countywide tourism guide to showcase Vernon County's tourism assets. In conjunction with this, prepare marketing and informational materials for specific assets. These should offer detailed information such as touring and shopping Amish areas, or paddling the Kickapoo River.
- 2.8. **Ensure that popular activity-based mobile applications are well-populated with information about local assets.** For example, applications for hikers, paddlers, and mountain bikers contain information submitted by users. Volunteers can be used to submit this information to applications. For example, hikers may walk a trail, record it in the app, and submit it along with pictures and a review.
- 2.9. **Develop and implement a countywide wayfinding plan.** Partner with the state and county transportation departments and local municipalities to install signage and other wayfinding devices directing visitors to Vernon County's

communities and destination attractions. These can include key businesses in addition to county, and state parks and trails. The County's Community Development Grant Program could be used to incentivize local participation.

- 2.10. **Facilitate additional lodging development to support growing tourism.** Work with partner municipalities and businesses to establish unique lodging offerings that build local wealth and create a unique experience for visitors. Potential opportunities may include additional glamping options, continued expansion and upgrades at county campgrounds, retreat centers, and lodging options tailored to outdoor recreationalists.
- 2.11. **Work with the county's tourism asset managers and local businesses to improve the conversion rate – the number of tourists patronizing local businesses.** This might be accomplished through events, sponsorship opportunities, kiosks with local community and business information at sites like trailheads and campgrounds, and other means.
- 2.12. **Explore opportunity to expand music and event offerings at the Vernon County fairgrounds.** Identify interest level and potential partners to further leverage this important resource to support tourism development.
- 2.13. **Prepare and implement a county-wide trail plan, with the goal of implementable projects supporting tourism while enhancing community quality of**

**life.** The plan may address both motorized and non-motorized trails, and land and water-based trails. It will provide a comprehensive blueprint for accelerating trail development across the county. It should be integrated with the state's new trail plan and include ties to the broader region.

- 2.14. **Establish partnership with the Genoa Visitor Center (USFWS), Stoddard, Genoa, and DeSoto to jointly promote tourism assets and destinations along the Mississippi River.** The new visitor center establishes an anchor to proactively promote the western portion of the County. Quarterly or semi-annual meetings could be held at the facility to identify issues and opportunities for tourism development.
- 2.15. **Utilize results of the tourism analysis to direct marketing efforts.** Targeted market segments and the "gap" geography (where Devil's Lake draws its visitors compared to Vernon County, can be used to direct future investments in social media advertising. Data on seasonal visitation can be used to plan marketing campaigns, and information about business visits will help to understand how visitor spending is being captured.

## GOAL 3 **Provide and market sites and buildings for economic development.**

Businesses need a location meeting their specific needs, whether that may be a prime commercial site or an industrial building with infrastructure needed by that business. In many of the county's small communities, the downtown is, and should be preserved as the primary commercial area. Industrial users may be better served by one of the business parks. The availability of existing buildings, or sites ready for development, is often essential to attracting new business investment.

**Objectives.** Through the actions outlined for this goal, Vernon County and its municipalities will plan for, and be prepared to deliver appropriate locations for new or expanded businesses. A preference will be given to siting businesses in the commercial cores of the county's villages and cities, using infill or redevelopment sites.

**Actions.** The actions here envision a role in coordinating the activities of local municipalities, providing support for development and marketing.

3.1. Ensure that the need for business sites and buildings is thoroughly addressed in the Comprehensive Plan. This should include:

- Inventory of existing commercial and industrial sites and buildings.
- Information about available infrastructure and capacity at existing sites.
- Environmental issues.
- Functional assessment of existing buildings, including age, condition, and limitations.

- Vacant commercial and industrial properties.
- Valuations, along with lease and purchase prices.
- Planning for future commercial and industrial sites and buildings, including renovation or adaptive reuse.

3.2. **Support the county's thriving downtowns through infill and adaptive reuse.** This type of development preserves existing structures and working landscapes by directing economic activity to previously developed lands including Vernon County's downtown districts. Consider modifying the Community Development Grant Program to provide a downtown building improvement incentive program available to owners of older properties (typically over 50 years) for renovation. Prioritize support for projects which leverage additional local or state funding sources. Continue to assist local municipalities in securing funds for downtown revitalization, including state and federal grants.

3.3. **Maintain site availability data, and community and business park profiles for all incorporated Vernon County communities.** Prepare and maintain professionally designed summaries highlighting key market study findings and local infrastructure available at business or industrial parks in Vernon County. Meet frequently with WEDC staff, municipal partners, and 7 Rivers Alliance to update profiles, discuss regional growth trends and marketing



approaches, and provide business park updates.

- 3.4. **Conduct research among the county’s businesses.** Meet with businesses to understand what drew them to their current site, their level of satisfaction with current location(s), and future needs. Most industrial growth is likely to result from expansion within existing businesses in the county and region. The information gathered through this research can be used to design and enhance industrial sites, and to communicate unique attributes of each business park through marketing materials.
- 3.5. **Assist municipalities with implementing their disaster recovery plans.** County departments can play a supportive role in assisting flood-impacted communities in implementing their recovery plans by connecting them with outside resources and helping them to secure additional grant funding for project implementation.
- 3.6. **Support development of appropriate new business sites in the county.** Demand for industrial space is limited and the County and its communities should use caution in investing in sites and buildings that may linger unused for a long time. Still, there are needs and unique opportunities that can be explored.

One of these is the potential to develop a multi-tenant speculative industrial building offering small lease spaces (1,000 to 2,500 square foot bays) targeting small businesses growing from a home location to larger space.

Dairyland Power Cooperative’s Genoa plant, decommissioned in 2021, presents a second opportunity. Portions of this site may be reused for industrial development that might include barge facilities on the Mississippi River.

County economic development may support either of these initiatives through grant applications to state or federal programs for planning or development.

## GOAL 4

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### Support existing businesses and entrepreneurship

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Locally-owned businesses have become more essential to the county’s economic growth in each of the past few decades. These same businesses were the most likely to have been impacted by the recent pandemic. In the short term, there is still a need to help many of them recover from business lost through pandemic closures. In some cases, that may include adjusting to lower levels of traffic as pandemic-era travel and shopping patterns return to normal. In the long term, there is a need to continue to support these businesses, help them to grow, and plan for transitions.

**Objectives.** Many economic development organizations spend the majority of their resources chasing the “silver bullet”; a large project that creates many jobs. These are rare, and over the last twenty years have gravitated to suburban centers, rather than rural counties. Vernon County recognizes that its own entrepreneurs have increasingly been a catalyst for economic growth, even if creating a single job at a time. Meanwhile, its existing businesses provide reliable jobs and incremental growth. Focusing economic development internally will provide Vernon County a greater return than spending most



of its resources on business attraction campaigns.

- 4.A. Vernon County will offer an environment conducive to the health of its local businesses.
- 4.B. Entrepreneurship is critical to the region's economic vitality, and economic development efforts will ensure that entrepreneurs have access to resources they need to make their new ventures successful.

**Actions.** The actions recommended in this section are intended to create a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and existing businesses.

**4.1. Re-establish the Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club (I&E Club), and assist in promoting business networking events.**

4.2. **Continue business retention and expansion visits in coordination with economic development partners.** Use visits to maintain relationships with major employers, identify training and resource needs. Ensure that visits include small businesses and cross industry sectors. Examples might include retail shops and restaurants, and farm and agricultural businesses. In addition to spotting issues with individual businesses, a business retention and expansion program will help to create a better understanding of industry-specific needs in the county.

4.3. **Initiate outreach to Vernon County's work-from-home community.** There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that a large number of people living in the county work from home. Engaging with this community will help economic

development and local officials understand who they are, why they are choosing to work from home, and how local initiatives can support them. Some of these individuals may be business owners or have the potential to start businesses in the county.

4.4. **Provide educational and training resources through partnerships with UW-Extension, VEDA, the SBDC, and area businesses.**

Utilize the newsletter and social media to showcase local and regional business counseling, entrepreneurship training, and other resources. Coordinate quarterly small business workshops throughout the county in partnership with the UW-La Crosse SBDC.

4.5. **Establish a youth entrepreneurship program.**

Partner with employers, schools, and economic development partners to strengthen and expand existing youth apprenticeship programs that connect Vernon County youth with local business leaders and employment opportunities. The program could be initiated with a youth "pitch contest" where the winner receives some funding and recognition at the annual awards banquet. Models such as Lemonade Day can be used to start a local program.

4.6. **Explore potential for a multi-tenant spec building and makerspace.**

Conduct a feasibility study for establishing a makerspace in the county, which may also provide a venue for skills training classes, shop space, business networking, and youth apprenticeship opportunities.

# GOAL 5

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## Support sustainable agricultural and natural resource-based economic development

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Agriculture is a significant contributor to the county's economy. A report prepared by the UW-Extension estimated that in 2019, agriculture supported 4,177 jobs in Vernon County, with \$715 million in economic impact.

Diverse and sustainable agriculture is a defining part of the county and its culture. The county has been a leader in organic and regenerative agriculture, with diverse crops and livestock, and countless examples of agritourism or farm-based and value-added production. This local knowledge and innovation can be tapped to further strengthen the agricultural sector.

Aside from agriculture, the county has forests that have been tapped for timber, at a small and sustainable scale, often used to supply the many Amish and Mennonite makers of furniture and other wood products. Elsewhere, this "Amish-made" furniture is a major attraction. In Vernon County, it is often difficult for potential buyers to find local wood products. This is a missed opportunity for craftspeople to sell their goods, and for a greater flow of tourist to the area.

**Objectives.** Vernon County's natural qualities are important to residents, and there is a strong desire that economic development enhance, rather than detract from the environment. This thought is central to how agriculture and natural resources are approached in the strategy.

**Actions.** The county will support enhanced viability of agriculture that is sustainable and is focused on family farms. This can be

primarily accomplished by enhancing profitability through diversification, specialization, value-added production, and access to markets.

**5.1. Adopt land use policies which support the long-term viability of farming, and are formalized in the County's Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Code.**

**5.2. Explore the potential to establish one or more Agricultural Enterprise Areas, which are community-led efforts designating areas important to Wisconsin's agricultural future.** Landowners in one of these areas are able to enter into farmland preservation agreements, agreeing to maintain their land as farmland for 15 years, and in return being eligible for a state income tax credit.

**5.3. Support agritourism business development, enhancing both agriculture and tourism.** Examples include farm stands, farmer's markets, farm experiences (ex., a petting zoo, hay ride, or farm tours), u-pick operations, farm stays, and more. This can be accomplished by ensuring compatible zoning, through tourism marketing, and education. The UW-Extension has several resources and can be a partner in implementation.

**5.4. Publish a Vernon County Farmer's Guide to highlight farmer's markets, on-farm markets, Amish farm stands, and Mennonite markets, opportunities to shop for locally-sourced wood products, and other farm-related activities.** A regional approach should be

considered to incorporate Amish stands up to Cashton, as well as nearby attractions in adjacent counties. Both a printed and online version and possibly an app-based resource should be provided. The guide should be integrated with a driving tour and wayfinding signage.

- 5.5. Explore the potential for an agricultural innovation center, as previously described in the 2017 Economic Development Strategy.

## GOAL 6

### Attract and retain an adequate workforce with the skills needed by county businesses

Workforce availability, and often quality, are concerns across most of the country.

Education, retail, hospitality, and manufacturing are sectors that have expressed difficulties. Beyond that, sectors that often rely on independent contractors, such as construction, are also seen to have challenges with worker availability.

**Objectives.** The intent of these initiatives is to reduce barriers to employment, primarily related to housing and childcare, while encouraging workers to develop the skills that move them into higher-paying positions.

- 6.A. Expand housing options that address issues of availability, quality, and affordability, all of which impact the county's ability to attract working-age households.
- 6.B. Support initiatives that expand the availability of affordable childcare for working families.
- 6.C. Create opportunities for residents to acquire in-demand skills and to attain work with higher wages.

**Actions.** Demographics, regulation, costs, and other factors limit what Vernon County can achieve through initiatives to relieve workforce shortages. Proposed actions seek to correct, to the extent possible, markets that are not working in ways that would support a growing working-age population, and to make available resources that can direct current workers or students into lucrative careers in Vernon County.

- 6.2. **Prepare a county-wide housing strategy.** The Comprehensive Plan update, planned to start in 2024, will include a chapter on housing. As part of the update, the plan should closely examine each of the county's cities and villages to identify priority sites where new single-family, attached, and multifamily housing might be constructed.
- 6.3. **Promote workforce housing development by matching interested developers with supportive municipalities.** See Appendix B for more specific recommendations.
- 6.4. **Take a leadership role in identifying workforce housing developers and inviting them to learn more about housing needs throughout the county.** WHEDA can provide a listing of successful workforce housing developers for the State of Wisconsin. The same strategy can be used for market rate development of multi-family units.
- 6.5. **Encourage and assist cities and villages in creating single-family lots (in small subdivisions or infill sites) that can be sold to builders or homebuyers to construct new single-family homes.** Small builders are typically

looking to build a few homes per year; however, they need access to affordable lots in order to build. Assist local municipalities with identifying developable land and securing resources to develop buildable lot. Assistance can include planning support, grant-writing, marketing of the available lots, and other forms of technical assistance.

6.6. **Encourage new senior-oriented or age-restricted housing through a partnership with seasoned developers, to create condominiums, senior apartments, or other housing targeting older county residents.**

Doing so will encourage older residents to move from family housing into units that are more age-appropriate, making existing housing available for younger families in the market. The lack of senior-oriented units is causing older households to remain in place, while many would prefer to move to other housing.

6.7. **Assist efforts to develop more affordable childcare in the county.** Use the success of the Early Learning Center as a case study to share challenges and successes with other Vernon County communities. Continue to support state and federal efforts to incentivize employer assisted childcare.

6.8. **Vernon County can leverage its quality of life and tourism assets to promote itself as a desirable place for high wage earners.** With an increase in work from home, the county can attract higher wage earners who are able to work remotely for a significant part of the week. Many of these potential

migrants will have spouses that can contribute to the local workforce. Resident-attraction strategies typically are supported with quality relocation materials (both printed and online) and make use of tourism marketing and travel shows to get before an audience.

6.9. **Support youth apprenticeship programs.** Partner with local school districts to strengthen existing programs that connect Vernon County's youth with area employers.

6.10. **Attract higher paying jobs to the county.** Support the growth of high wage industries through workforce development initiatives, and by providing sites and locations for expanding industry including in Vernon County's industrial parks.

## Indicators of success

It is important for any organization to monitor progress. This is commonly done by benchmarking against reference areas, which may include larger regions, comparable communities, and those that might be considered aspirational. For Vernon County, those places might include the State of Wisconsin, adjacent counties, and comparable places such as Adams, Green Lake, and Iowa Counties.

Several indicators that might be included are reported through federal, state, or private sources, and periodically updated, not less than annually. The following might be considered.

- County sales tax disbursements (monthly – WI Department of Revenue)
- County room tax (lodging tax) collected (annual – WI Department of Revenue)
- Tourism economic impact (annual – WI Department of Tourism)
- Population/change (annual – US Bureau of the Census)
- Households/change (annual – US Bureau of the Census)
- Household income (annual – US Bureau of the Census)
- Labor force (monthly – WI Department of Workforce Development)
- Unemployment (monthly – WI Department of Workforce Development)
- Labor force participation rates (annual)
- Wages/change (annual – US Bureau of Labor Statistics)
- Dependency ratio (number of workers for every non-worker) (annual)
- Residential building permits issued (monthly – US Department of Housing and Urban Development)

Other discreet data can be used to report economic development activities. The following are examples.

- Businesses assisted, number, industry
- Business retention and expansion visits
- Hosted or sponsored events, attendance
- Commercial/industrial construction
- Grant applications submitted, awarded
- County grant program applications, awards
- Website traffic, social media followers



## APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

While Vernon County's population continues to slowly increase, its growth has been uneven.

According to the State of Wisconsin Department of Administration's population estimates, most growth is occurring in unincorporated areas of the county. Of the 14 municipalities within Vernon County experiencing population growth between 2020 and 2023, only two were incorporated cities or villages; the Village of Stoddard and the City of Hillsboro. Conversely, among the fifteen municipalities experiencing population losses, seven were incorporated cities or villages.

The Village of Stoddard was the fastest-growing municipality, with 8.2 percent increase over the period, followed by the Towns of Clinton (5.4 percent), Kickapoo (3.3 percent), Christiana (3.0 percent), and Whitestown (2.7 percent). The City of Viroqua had the largest percent decline in population (2.9 percent), followed by the Villages of Readstown (2.1 percent), La Farge (2.1 percent), and Genoa (1.7 percent), and the Town of Sterling (1.5 percent).

POPULATION CHANGE 2000 TO 2023

MUNICIPALITY	TYPE	POPULATION			
		2023	2020	CHANGE	PERCENT
Clinton	T	1,448	1,374	74	5.39%
Stoddard	V	909	840	69	8.21%
Christiana	T	1,023	993	30	3.02%
Kickapoo	T	746	722	24	3.32%
Harmony	T	903	882	21	2.38%
Viroqua	T	1,764	1,744	20	1.15%
Coon	T	747	729	18	2.47%
Hillsboro	C	1,414	1,397	17	1.22%
Whitestown	T	640	623	17	2.73%
Greenwood	T	938	923	15	1.63%
Forest	T	628	617	11	1.78%
Jefferson	T	1,280	1,270	10	0.79%
Webster	T	830	821	9	1.10%
Union	T	818	809	9	1.11%
Liberty	T	349	341	8	2.35%
Westby	C	2,339	2,332	7	0.30%
Stark	T	353	351	2	0.57%
Genoa	T	753	753	0	0.00%
Wheatland	T	587	588	- 1	- 0.17%
Chaseburg	V	240	241	- 1	- 0.41%
Franklin	T	1,104	1,106	- 2	- 0.18%
Hillsboro	T	784	787	- 3	- 0.38%
Genoa	V	228	232	- 4	- 1.72%
Hamburg	T	948	956	- 8	- 0.84%
Sterling	T	542	550	- 8	- 1.45%
Readstown	V	368	376	- 8	- 2.13%
Coon Valley	V	749	758	- 9	- 1.19%
Bergen	T	1,352	1,365	- 13	- 0.95%
La Farge	V	715	730	- 15	- 2.05%
Viroqua	C	4,375	4,504	- 129	- 2.86%
<b>VERNON COUNTY</b>		<b>30,914</b>	<b>30,714</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>0.7%</b>
<b>WISCONSIN</b>		<b>5,893,718</b>	<b>5,951,400</b>	<b>-57,682</b>	<b>-1.00%</b>

Several of Vernon County's demographic measures were benchmarked against six surrounding counties (Monroe, Juneau, Richland, Sauk, and Crawford) and the State of Wisconsin. Vernon County and the region both trail Wisconsin in most measures, as is common with rural areas, compared to the more suburban parts of the state.





DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

		VERNON	MONROE	JUNEAU	SAUK	RICHLAND	CRAWFORD	REGION	WISCONSIN
POPULATION	2022 Population	31,060	46,109	26,866	65,777	17,090	16,007	202,909	5,892,539
	2020 Population	30,714	46,274	26,718	65,763	17,304	16,113	28,984	
	2010 Population	29,773	44,673	26,664	61,976	18,021	16,644	28,250	
	2000 Population	28,056	40,899	24,316	55,225	17,924	17,243	26,238	
	1990 Population	25,617	36,633	21,650	46,975	17,521	15,940	23,477	
	Change: 2010 to 2020	3.20%	3.60%	0.20%	6.10%	-4.00%	-3.20%	0.98%	3.60%
	Change: 2000 to 2020	9.50%	13.10%	9.90%	19.10%	-3.50%	↓-6.60%	6.92%	9.9%
AGE	Preschool (0 to 4)	7%	6%	5%	6%	5%	5%	5%	
	School age (5 to 17)	19%	19%	15%	17%	16%	15%	17%	16%
	College age (18 to 24)	7%	7%	6%	7%	7%	7%	6%	10%
	Young adult (25 to 44)	20%	24%	23%	25%	20%	21%	19%	25%
	Older adult (45 to 64)	26%	26%	29%	26%	28%	28%	23%	26%
	Senior (65 plus)	20%	17%	21%	19%	24%	24%	21%	18%
	Median age	41.3	39.7	45.7	41.1	46.5	47.2	43.6	39.9
LABOR	2022 Labor force	15,166	23,119	13,265	34,199	8,830	7,037	14,517	
	5-Year change	-3.90%	-2.00%	-2.70%	-4.10%	-5.20%	-11.00%	-4.82%	-1.9%
	Avg. wage per Job 2022	\$43,157	\$49,293	\$47,814	\$47,124	\$43,262	\$41,638	\$45,381	\$59,203
	Bach. Degree or higher	24.30%	20.10%	16.10%	25.20%	19.90%	17.50%	20.52%	32.0%
	Hispanic or Latino	2%	5%	3%	6%	3%	2%	4%	7%
HOUSEHOLDS AND INCOME	2022 Households	11,991	17,992	10,598	27,313	7,196	6,544	81,634	2,425,488
	Single person households	30%	30%	30%	28%	31%	31%	30%	31%
	Average household size	2.5	2.5	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.3
	2021 Poverty rate	14.7	11.4	13.9	9.7	13.7	11.9	13	10.8
	2021 Median household income	\$60,041	\$62,742	\$57,000	\$70,254	\$59,120	\$57,130	\$61,048	\$67,150
	2000 Median household income	\$34,338	\$38,448	\$36,053	\$43,928	\$35,652	\$35,218	\$37,273	\$44,503
	Change: 2000 to 2021	74.9%	63.2%	58.1%	59.9%	65.8%	62.2%	64.0%	50.9%
	2022 Per capita income	\$50,622	\$50,008	\$46,696	\$62,052	\$51,382	\$50,741	\$51,917	\$61,575
HOUSING UNITS	Housing units	13,874	19,804	14,540	30,907	8,507	8,699	96,331	2,734,511
	Owner occupied	69%	65%	58%	65%	65%	56%	64%	60%
	Renter occupied	18%	26%	15%	24%	20%	19%	21%	29%
	Seasonal/recreational Use	9%	3%	21%	7%	9%	16%	10%	7%
	2022 residential building permits	98	90	171	370	71	37	837	21,072

The area's Amish and Mennonite population plays a role in county demographic composition. The presence of this population results in larger family sizes, as well as depressed income levels because much of the population works outside the formal economy.

**Population Growth.** Vernon County defies the typical trajectory of many rural counties by adding population. While it lost population from the 1920's through the 1970's, since that time it has been steadily growing, with a 2022 population estimate of 31,060.

- Vernon County is in the top third of counties in terms of school age population (ages 5 to 17) as a percent of total population (19 percent).
- Vernon County is in the middle third of Wisconsin counties in its percentage of older residents. (age 65 or older).
- The county's median age of 41.3 years is lower than the six-county regional average of 43.6.
- Vernon County has a comparatively low percent of Hispanic or Latino households (about two percent, versus four percent for the region and seven percent for the state). It is likely this percentage will increase over time, as the existing labor force continues to contract.

- The county's labor force is shrinking, but at a lower rate of decline compared with regional counties (3.9 versus 4.8 percent).

**Income.** Income in Vernon County appears to be lower than in other parts of the state. This is partially a reflection of the Amish and Mennonite culture, where paid work is less common.

- Vernon County is in the bottom third of Wisconsin counties in per capita income.
- Vernon County has the highest poverty rate in region.
- Vernon County ranks in the bottom third of Wisconsin counties in average wage per job.
- The 74.9 percent increase in household incomes between 2000 and 2021 was higher than any of the comparison counties and the State.

**Education.** Vernon County has a significantly higher than average educational attainment compared with the region. Adults with a bachelor's degree or higher make up 24.3 percent of the total, versus 20.5 percent for the region. Businesses such as Organic Valley's headquarters, and the area's attractiveness as a place to live, help to explain this. Conversely, the Amish and Mennonite cultures discourage advanced education.

## APPENDIX B: HOUSING ANALYSIS

A review of relevant data, along with input from community stakeholders, suggest that housing is a critically important issue for Vernon County. Concerns cross a number of topics including affordability, sustainable design, the impact of short-term rentals, and availability of starter homes.

The housing market is defined as Vernon County. There are 13,837 housing units in Vernon County and 11,991 households, according to the latest five-year estimates. Almost one-third (29.6 percent) of households are comprised of a single individual. Compared with La Crosse County and the State of Wisconsin, Vernon County has a smaller percentage of renter-occupied housing units (17.5 percent), with only Juneau County (15.1 percent) having a lower percentage among regional comparison counties.

There are several methods that can be used to measure housing affordability. According to the National Association of Realtors, housing affordability has hit an all-time low

nationally. Historically, the industry used a standard stated of roughly 2.6 times an individual’s household income to measure affordability. Vernon County’s median home value to household income ratio is 3.2, which suggests that the average buyer cannot afford the average home for sale in the county. Vernon County’s figure is higher than all of the comparison counties except for La Crosse County, meaning housing affordability is particularly challenging when compared to the region. It does remain below the ratio for Wisconsin (3.25) and the nation (3.75), suggesting that housing affordability is an even more acute issue elsewhere.

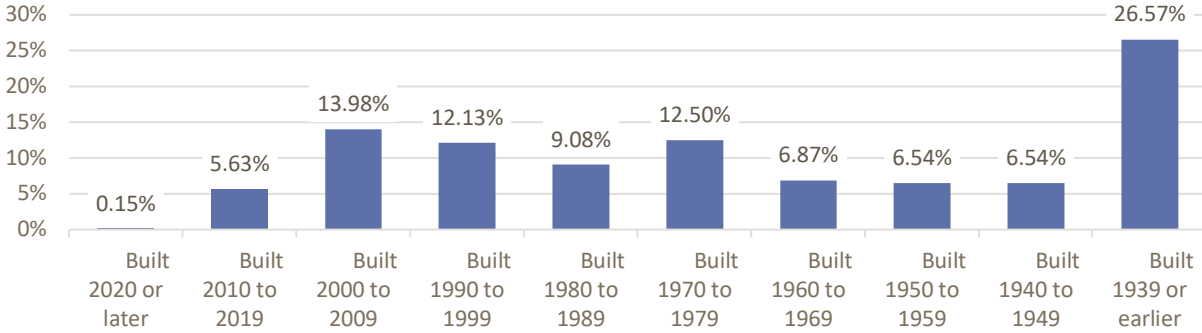
Market supply is one of the key drivers of affordability. In highly-constrained markets, with little new housing construction occurring, home prices tend to rise. The annual number of single-family and multi-family building permits issued over the past twenty years illustrates how few multi-family permits have been issued over the past decade. These are typically apartments, and the age of most units is a concern for many

### REGIONAL HOUSING STATISTICS

	VERNON	MONROE	RICHLAND	CRAWFORD	GRANT	JUNEAU	LA CROSSE
Housing units	13,874	19,804	8,507	8,699	22,148	14,540	52,777
Households	11,991	17,992	7,196	6,544	19,863	10,598	50,179
One-person households	29.6%	30.4%	30.8%	31.4%	29.4%	29.8%	31.9%
Renter occupied	17.5%	25.9%	19.8%	19.1%	27.2%	15.1%	36%
Median value	\$192,800	\$184,000	\$161,600	\$160,300	\$173,400	\$153,700	\$226,600
Median monthly rent	\$785	\$919	\$755	\$781	\$795	\$820	\$984
Median household income	\$60,041	\$62,742	\$59,120	\$57,130	\$57,861	\$57,000	\$62,302
Ratio median home value to hh income	3.2	2.93	2.73	2.8	3	2.7	3.63
Ratio median rent to median hh income	15.6%	17.6%	15.3%	16.4%	16.5%	17.2%	18.9%
Median monthly mortgage payment	\$1,411	\$1,434	\$1,268	\$1,293	\$1,387	\$1,340	\$1,588



VERNON COUNTY HOUSING UNITS BY YEAR BUILT (%)



VERNON COUNTY BUILDING PERMITS (2000-2022)



renters. Only 5.9 percent of rental units have been constructed since 2010, while 45.1 percent of rental units are more than 50 years old.

Since 2000, there have been 1,890 single-family units permitted, or an average of 86 per year. These are more likely to be owner-occupied, though some single-family homes may be rentals, and some owner-occupied housing may be in multifamily buildings. About one in five owned units (21.2 percent) has been constructed since 2000.

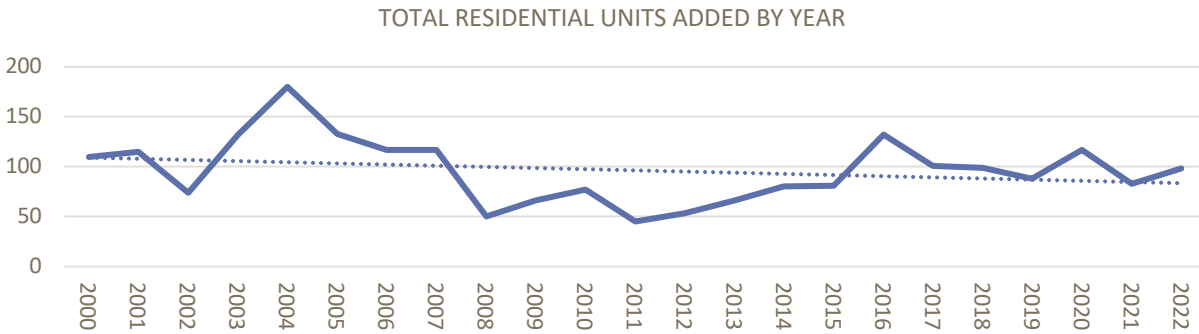
Despite a growing number of units added per year, the number of housing units in Vernon County only increased 1.6 percent between 2010 and 2022, from 13,646 to 13,874. The trendline over the past two decades shows a

long-term decline in the rate of housing production. This is consistent with state and national trends stemming from the housing crisis that began in 2007. The home construction industry has not recovered from the loss of businesses and construction workers, and there has been little speculative housing construction in most markets.

Monthly home sales for July have averaged 216 since 2007, according to Wisconsin Association of Realtor’s data. Home sales had been increasing steadily since 2012-2013, but the housing market has contracted following the COVID pandemic, with fewer sales and steady home prices.

The median price for a Vernon County home has increased 62 percent since 2017, while





the median household income has only increased by 30 percent.

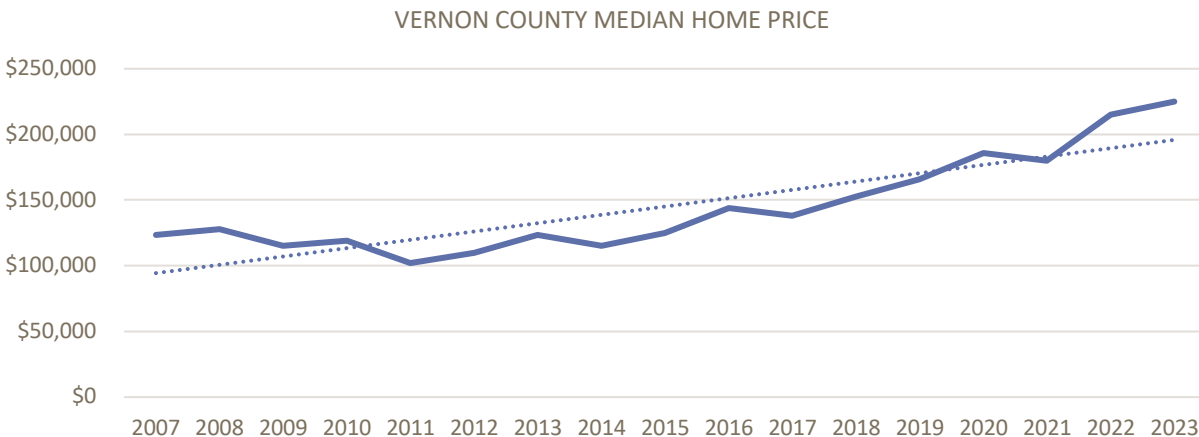
There are multiple impediments to new housing development in Vernon County, including steep slopes and flood hazards, as well as groundwater contamination susceptibility. In addition to environmental constraints, there are few residential lots available for new construction. Few of Vernon County’s communities have proactively addressed housing production, while older housing units face obsolescence.

## Market Overview

The housing crisis that began in 2007 had a lasting impact on demand and supply for new and existing housing. Many households that were once homeowners are now renting, and younger households have postponed purchases. These circumstances are partially

a function of supply, as formerly owned homes were purchased, often in foreclosure, and converted to rentals. The same trend continued through COVID, with urban homeowners purchasing second homes in places like the Driftless Area, and property owners converting traditional rentals to short-term rentals. While these housing units have come off the market, there have been fewer new homes constructed. The problem is particularly acute among homes accessible to lower and moderate-income households.

The recession and COVID should not be seen as the lone, or perhaps not even as the most significant cause for changes in housing demand. Long term demographic and economic trends have been leading us toward current market conditions. For example, the median home price has increased at a much higher rate over the past four decades than



the median household income. These factors will result in shifting preferences including increased demand for rental housing units and senior housing.

An aging population is among the greatest forces affecting the market. As each generation moves through different stages its members pass through a housing cycle that might include a rental apartment, starter home, one or more “step-up” homes, retirement house or condo, assisted living unit, etc. As the Baby Boomers began to retire, it was widely expected that there would be a surge in the number of existing homes entering the market as members of that generation sought new homes. This milestone, however, coincided with a tightened housing market, during which many homeowners who did not have the need to sell have instead put off a move. Home care services and on-line shopping have also encouraged older homeowners to stay put. Meanwhile, a large majority of homeowners (of all ages) are locked into very low mortgage rates, creating a disincentive to put their homes on the market, especially when there is little supply available and mortgage rates have climbed considerably over the past year.

COVID and work-from-home have also impacted the housing market, with an estimated 30 percent of employed persons now in what has been called a contingent workforce of self-employed individuals, freelancers, and contract workers. Anecdotally, this has led to an influx of migrants into the county, competing with existing buyers for housing.

The resulting picture is one in which households may not be able to afford as much housing as they did in the past. A limited supply of housing, relatively high home prices, and higher interest rates have all taken the luster off of home ownership as a means of building wealth. On the other hand, there is

an increased interest in renting and improved perceptions of renters. Even among existing homeowners, nearly half expect to rent at some point in the future.

These forces can be seen at work in Vernon County. The current housing market (fourth quarter of 2023) is characterized by a shortage of available homes for sale. Currently there are only around 117 homes on the market, according to Zillow.

Fewer homes for sale may reflect a large number of homeowners “locked” in place with historically low mortgage rates, reluctant to put their homes on the market in part due to the inability to find a suitable replacement property. Another factor may be investors buying single family homes and converting them to second homes or short-term rentals.

## Market Demand

The trends described above paint a mixed picture for future housing demand. While there is pent-up demand and home ownership remains a goal for a majority of households, forces are at work that can suppress market growth, including lack of available lots, high construction costs, labor scarcity, and land use restrictions.

The estimates presented here reflect slow county-wide growth. The market for new housing was calculated using historical data and applied rates of change specific to Vernon County. The incremental steps in this process include:

- Population projections by age cohort, using a cohort-component method.
- Household projections based on the population projections.
- Determination of overall housing demand by age cohort, consisting of demand from new households and



from existing households in the community.

- Determination of demand by housing type based on historical patterns and preferences by age cohort.
- Determination of housing affordability using a standard of 30 to 35 percent of household income applied to housing.

Vernon County is projected to add about 1,061 new households over the next decade, growing to a total of 12,894 households. While the greater share of these new households will be seeking owner occupied housing, there will be a significant number of renter households, and especially those

wanting options for senior housing. Averaged over the decade, Vernon County can expect to see annual demand for 37 rental units and 70 additional units for purchase, including a mix of attached and detached homes.

Future housing demand is projected over the next ten years, from 2023 to 2033. The model suggests that Vernon County will see an increase in the number of households 34 and younger, a decline in the number of households aged 35 to 64, and a large increase in the number of older households (except those 85+).

Younger buyers are typically in the market for lower-priced starter homes, which are scarce

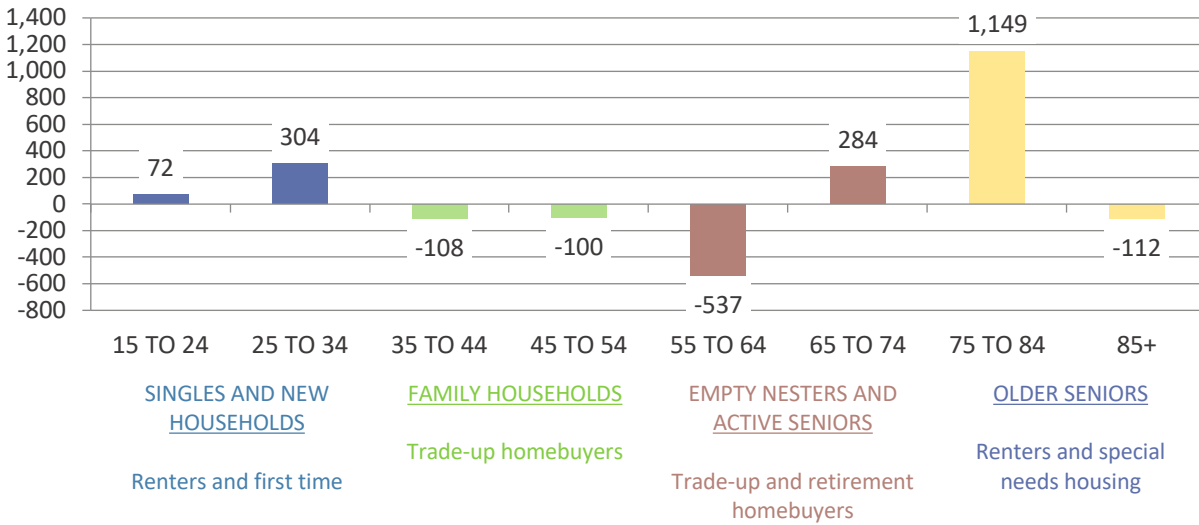
PROJECTED CHANGE IN HOUSEHOLDS WITHIN VERNON COUNTY

HOUSEHOLDS BY AGE	2023			2028			2033		
	TOTAL	OWN	RENT	TOTAL	OWN	RENT	TOTAL	OWN	RENT
15 TO 24	342	104	238	377	115	262	434	132	302
25 TO 34	1,298	777	521	1,282	767	515	1,625	973	652
35 TO 44	1,858	1,466	392	1,839	1,451	388	1,756	1,385	370
45 TO 54	1,852	1,545	307	1,795	1,498	298	1,711	1,427	284
55 TO 64	2,698	2,296	402	2,574	2,190	384	2,069	1,761	308
65 TO 74	2,163	1,923	240	2,364	2,102	262	2,530	2,249	281
75 TO 84	1,174	895	279	1,347	1,027	320	2,480	1,891	589
85+	448	330	118	360	265	95	289	213	76
TOTAL	11,833	9,336	2,497	12,462	9,769	2,693	12,894	10,031	2,863

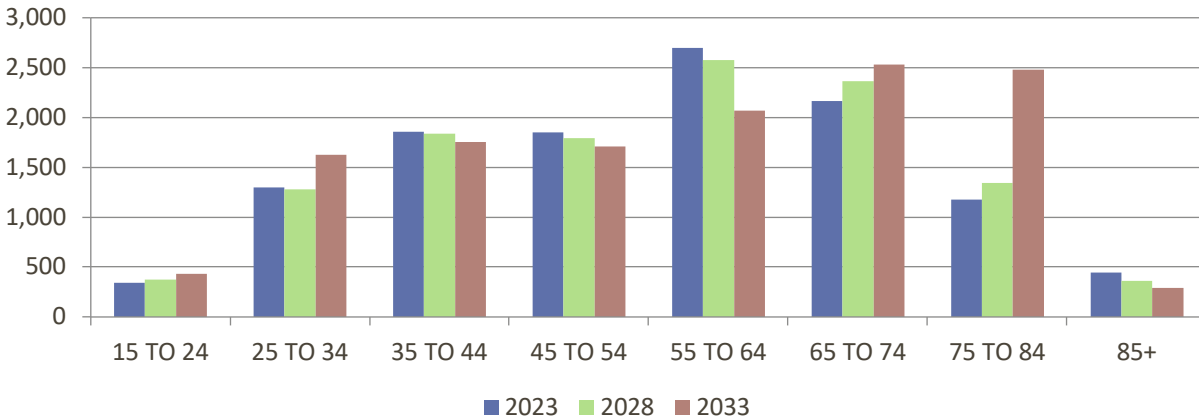
EXPECTED CHANGE	2028			2033			TOTAL		
	TOTAL	OWN	RENT	TOTAL	OWN	RENT	TOTAL	OWN	RENT
15 TO 24	35	11	24	57	17	40	92	28	64
25 TO 34	-16	-10	-6	343	205	138	327	196	131
35 TO 44	-19	-15	-4	-83	-66	-18	-102	-81	-22
45 TO 54	-57	-47	-9	-85	-71	-14	-141	-118	-23
55 TO 64	-124	-106	-18	-505	-430	-75	-629	-535	-94
65 TO 74	201	179	22	166	148	18	367	326	41
75 TO 84	173	132	41	1,133	864	269	1,306	996	310
85+	-88	-65	-23	-71	-52	-19	-159	-117	-42
TOTAL	629	433	196	432	262	170	1,061	695	366



PROJECTED CHANGE IN HOUSEHOLDS BY STAGE



PROJECTED HOUSEHOLDS BY AGE OF HOUSEHOLDER



in in the current market. Middle-aged buyers in their mid-30’s to 60’s are considered “trade-up” buyers of larger and more expensive homes, but the model suggests there will be a decline in the number of these households. That could bring additional supply onto the market and help ease home prices. Older buyers are also looking to purchase a home, although there may be very few units meeting preferences for low maintenance and accessible design. These are often condominiums, which are not being built in

any significant number within the county or region.

As people age, they tend to move one final time to a home where they have better access to health care services, or perhaps even into an assisted living community. Because these types of housing are rarely found outside of cities, there is often a significant flow of elderly residents from smaller communities and rural areas into larger population centers. Recent research has also demonstrated a trend for people who have moved to the south

in their early retirement years to move back to northern cities where they still have family and other connections.

**Demand for Owner Occupied Housing.**

The potential market for new housing is comprised of two parts: 1) the increase in demand due to a growing population; and 2) current residents in the market for a new home. In this way, the potential opportunity to sell homes is greater than simply the number of new households expected to be formed. Adding in households that are trading one home for another may also result in a profile of buyers different from that of the change in households. In Vernon County, the largest demand is anticipated to come from the 25 to 34 year old cohort of householders.

About three-quarters of buyers will fall between 25 and 54 years of age. This spread covers a wide range of starter and trade-up home possibilities. The county has some

affordable housing, with seventeen homes listed at \$250,000 or less . These tended to be smaller homes, homes in poor condition, or homes which are dated and have not seen significant remodeling in many years. The other type of housing common in this price range is manufactured housing; however, no such units are currently on the market. A price range of \$250,000 to \$500,000 will purchase a newer ranch style or older character home in Westby or Viroqua, or a smaller home with acreage in the country.

Newer homes on large lots, homes with water views, and attractive historic homes and larger homes will command a price of \$500,000 or more. There are currently no condominiums listed for sale in the county.

The numbers estimated here reflect an expected distribution of demand based on typical buyer patterns. The majority of buyers will be in the market for detached homes.

ESTIMATED ANNUAL HOMEBUYERS BY AGE

AGE OF HHOLDER	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033
15 TO 24	12	14	14	14	14	14	14	13	13	13	13
25 TO 34	100	109	110	111	111	111	109	108	106	104	102
35 TO 44	50	54	55	56	56	55	55	54	53	52	51
45 TO 54	37	41	41	42	42	41	41	40	40	39	38
55 TO 64	32	35	36	36	36	36	36	35	34	34	33
65 TO 74	12	14	14	14	14	14	14	13	13	13	13
75+	5	5	6	6	6	6	5	5	5	5	5
TOTAL	249	272	276	278	278	276	273	270	265	260	255

ESTIMATED ANNUAL HOMEBUYERS BY PROPERTY TYPE

TYPE	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033
DETACHED	207	225	229	231	231	229	227	224	220	216	212
ROWHOUSE	15	16	17	17	17	17	16	16	16	16	15
CONDO (5+)	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
CONDO (2-4)	10	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	10	10
OTHER	15	16	17	17	17	17	16	16	16	16	15



There is demand for owned attached housing including rowhouses, small condominium buildings (two to four units), and larger condominium buildings (five or more units). This is particularly attractive to first-time buyers and seniors.

Vernon County offers many safe and attractive neighborhoods along with an excellent school system. Most newer housing has been built in the rural portions of the county, and in the Viroqua area.

According to the Wisconsin Association of Realtors, the median home price in Vernon County was \$248,500 in November 2023. The median is the point at which half of all sales are at a lower price and half are at a higher price. Based on the distribution of incomes in the county, approximately 51 percent of potential buyers could afford a more expensive home valued at \$250,000 or greater. The median home price appears to be

accurately reflecting the purchasing power of Vernon County households.

These estimates are based on an income-qualified approach to determining affordability, where it is assumed that a typical household can afford to pay between 30 and 35 percent of their gross income toward a mortgage. The ability of households to afford a more expensive home, and the lack of an inventory of such homes in the county (with the features to be expected of a more expensive home) is likely one reason that many middle-aged households and younger professionals are leaving Vernon County to purchase homes in surrounding communities.

Vernon County's cities and villages have limited opportunities to meet the demand for detached owner-occupied housing due to a lack of available lots. Land development in Vernon County is complicated by natural

ESTIMATED ANNUAL HOMEBUYERS BY PURCHASE PRICE

PRICE RANGE: LOW/HIGH	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033
UNDER \$100,000	44	48	49	49	49	49	48	47	47	46	45
\$100,000 TO \$149,999	28	30	31	31	31	31	31	30	30	29	29
\$150,000 TO \$199,999	33	36	37	37	37	37	36	36	35	35	34
\$200,000 TO \$249,000	22	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	23	23	22
\$250,000 TO \$299,999	29	31	32	32	32	32	32	31	31	30	29
\$300,000 TO \$349,000	20	22	22	22	22	22	22	22	21	21	21
\$350,000 TO \$399,999	19	21	21	21	21	21	21	20	20	20	19
\$400,000 TO \$449,999	10	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	10
\$450,000 TO \$499,999	11	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	11	11	11
\$500,000 OR MORE	34	37	37	38	38	37	37	36	36	35	34



resource constraints and a dearth of developers capable of financing land development. Elsewhere in Wisconsin and in rural areas around the country, small communities wanting to encourage housing development have taken the initiative to create buildable lots for sale to owners, or contractors wanting to build speculative housing.

In the county’s larger communities (Hillsboro, Viroqua, and Westby) redevelopment sites can support condominium and rowhouse units, particularly when adjacent to amenities such as restaurants, trails, libraries, and health care facilities. Financial and technical assistance from the cities and villages may be required to induce the initial redevelopment projects, where developers may be less certain of market demand. Later townhome and condominium development is less likely to need assistance, once there is a better understanding of absorption patterns and preferences, in terms of design and amenities.

County initiatives may help to identify suitable areas for housing production throughout the county, as part of the upcoming comprehensive planning process. This should include excess county-owned land that lends itself to housing development,

as occurred in Viroqua with the sale of former county-owned property for new multifamily housing development.

**Estimated Demand for Rental Housing.**

Households living in apartments move more frequently than people in owned housing. This leads to a far greater annual number of people in the market for a new apartment. Their decision will be based on a combination of affordability, condition, location, and features.

Vernon County’s rental market can anticipate steady growth through the coming decade. As with owner-occupied housing, this growth will not be consistent across all age groups. Reflecting changes in the overall population, the change in demand will be greatest for renter households headed by a person 25 to 34 years (annual demand of 270 units by 2029), followed by households headed by a person between 65 and 74 years (annual demand of 247 units by 2029).

Rental options are somewhat limited, with only nine listings on Apartments.com as of December 2023. More units may be advertised locally or by word of mouth.

It is likely that many households are unable to find apartments meeting their preferences.

ESTIMATED ANNUAL RENTERS BY AGE

AGE OF HHOLDER	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033
15 TO 24	112	114	116	118	119	120	120	121	121	121	121
25 TO 34	206	210	216	223	230	238	245	252	258	264	270
35 TO 44	154	152	150	148	147	146	146	146	147	148	150
45 TO 54	117	116	116	116	116	115	115	114	114	113	113
55 TO 64	148	144	140	137	134	131	128	126	124	122	120
65 TO 74	111	114	115	116	116	116	116	115	113	112	111
75 TO 84	142	156	169	182	194	205	216	225	234	241	247
85+	32	31	30	29	29	29	29	30	30	31	31
TOTAL	1,020	1,037	1,053	1,068	1,084	1,100	1,114	1,128	1,141	1,153	1,163



A survey of the rental community identifies five options.

- Single family homes and rental conversions. The strong rental market, driven in part by COVID, has helped to support a rental market with some small operators renting single family homes or two-unit buildings that are often conversions of single-family homes. Many of these buildings can be acquired relatively inexpensively because of their location, size, or deficiencies that make them less desirable for owner occupants. Rents range from around \$600 to \$1,500 per month for one to three bedrooms.
- Older rental complexes. A few older rental complexes can be found throughout the county. Units in these buildings are usually more affordably-priced, and may be designated affordable and/or accept Section 8 vouchers. They are less likely to have amenities found in newer complexes, and none provide garages. Pricing is lower, at \$500 to \$850 per month, or 30 percent of gross income.
- Newer suburban-style apartment buildings. These are typically two-

ESTIMATED ANNUAL RENTERS BY MONTHLY RENT

MONTHLY RENT	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033
UNDER \$600	174	177	180	183	185	188	191	193	195	197	199
\$600 TO \$699	90	92	93	94	96	97	99	100	101	102	103
\$700 TO \$799	78	79	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89
\$800 TO \$899	72	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	82
\$900 TO \$999	90	92	93	95	96	97	99	100	101	102	103
\$1,000 TO \$1,099	38	38	39	40	40	41	41	42	42	43	43
\$1,100 TO \$1,199	24	24	25	25	26	26	26	27	27	27	27
\$1,200 TO \$1,299	33	33	34	34	35	35	36	36	37	37	37
\$1,300 TO \$1,399	42	42	43	44	44	45	45	46	46	47	47
\$1,400 TO \$1,499	32	32	33	33	33	34	34	35	35	36	36
\$1,500 TO \$1,749	44	44	45	46	47	47	48	48	49	49	50
\$1,750 TO \$1,999	55	56	57	57	58	59	60	61	61	62	63
\$2,000 OR MORE	248	252	256	260	264	268	271	275	278	281	283



story buildings with eight or more one- and two-bedroom apartments surrounding a courtyard or open space. A small number offer attached or unattached garages. Rents typically start around \$1,200 for a two-bedroom unit.

- Upper-level commercial apartments. Several second-floor apartments over first floor commercial spaces provide rental housing in the cities and villages. A recent listing in downtown Coon Valley was renting for \$1,000/month for a two-bedroom, one bathroom apartment. More typically, second-floor units are among the county's lowest-cost housing and the quality appears to reflect that price.
- Downtown multi-story apartments. There are few of these buildings in the county. Rock Avenue Apartments in downtown Viroqua lists one and two-bedroom units for \$899 to \$1,090 per month, with no units available at the time properties were canvassed.

The table provides an expected distribution of the number of households by the monthly rent they can afford to pay, based solely on their income. Not surprisingly, there is significant demand at the lower end of the spectrum, with 17 percent of renters only able to afford less than \$600 per month.

What is more notable is the large number of households that can afford to pay higher rents than the market is currently asking. A search for units renting at \$1,750 or more yielded no results (December 2023). Data in the table below indicates that 29 percent of renters can afford \$1,750 or more in monthly rental payments.

The conditions observed here, including the supply of rental housing on the market, the

rents being asked, and the ability of households to afford higher rents, suggest that there is a large untapped demand for better quality rental units in the county. The location, amenities, and quality of design and finishes will determine the marketability of any such units. There is also a large demand for housing at the most affordable end of the spectrum. This type of housing often requires public subsidy, as the market is unable to provide it profitably.

## Investment in Existing Housing

In addition to supporting new owner occupied and rental housing development, there is a need to maintain and strengthen the county's existing housing stock.

There are two fundamental strategies to consider. The first strategy includes incentive programs and supportive policies focused on home improvement, neighborhood revitalization, and converting rentals back to owned housing. These are the "typical" strategies many communities employ and include programs such as code enforcement, homeowner rehabilitation incentives, single family deconversion incentives, rental licensing and inspection programs. These policies and programs center on removing or ameliorating neighborhood problems such as poor maintenance, littering, and unsafe living conditions.

The second strategy focuses on recognizing and highlighting the community's assets, or strengths. This approach focuses on promoting the advantages of the neighborhood or community. It recognizes that people move to the neighborhood because it offers them something they want, not because it no longer has certain problems. Both types of strategies are important, but typically are driven by local municipalities rather than county government. Where

Vernon County's small villages may not have the staffing or resources to execute such programs, the County might consider a role.

## Recommendations

Vernon County should see moderate growth in population and the demand for housing over the coming decade. Some of this growth will occur in the rural areas, and a portion of it will be manufactured housing. However, many households are increasingly attracted to walkable neighborhoods with recreation, shopping, services, and other amenities. These are places like the downtowns of Westby, Hillsboro, and Viroqua. New housing offered in these locations will appeal to renters or buyers seeking an alternative to a suburban setting.

The county can compete to add new multifamily housing as both rental and owner-occupied units. Introducing new housing will help to retain and attract middle- and upper-income households, expand the tax base, provide a type of housing not widely available in the region, and help businesses attract a skilled workforce. Adding new rental units or replacing existing low-income units that may be substandard, and adding to the number of market rate apartments, will accomplish many of these same goals.

How much housing is produced and where it is produced is a question that needs to be addressed in the context of the county's comprehensive planning process. This is especially the case for those towns which may come under county zoning in the future. However, the majority of housing units produced over the next decade are likely to be located in the cities and villages. It will be up to them to identify housing targets, the assistance they offer and conditions they place on development, and the constraints of the sites that will be made available.

Given the tangential role that counties play in housing development, the following general recommendations are provided, with the recognition that it is the cities and villages that will be driving the majority of these initiatives.

**Market rental housing.** It is reasonable to expect that Vernon County can double its recent levels of apartment production, adding up to 30 units in rental apartment buildings annually through 2033, or 300 total county-wide. Since 2016, there has been no significant number of multifamily units added in the county. Much of the county's rental inventory is decades old and there is likely pent-up demand for new units. Two types of apartments will be most suited to the county. These are better-quality units marketed to singles and couples with well-paying jobs, and units designed for seniors. Rental demand for seniors over 65 will comprise a significant portion of the demand. The majority of these units will likely be produced in the county's larger cities and villages, where there is greater access to shopping and services.

**Affordable rental housing.** Given the high market rents, and the inability of household incomes to keep up with housing costs, the demand for workforce housing is likely to increase over time. Low-income housing tax credits (LIHTC) have produced a large number of high-quality housing units across the country.

Oftentimes, these apartments are indistinguishable from similar market rate products, and over time it has become more common to blend a mix of subsidized and market rate units in a single project. They are professionally managed and can be a desirable option for low to moderate income households. The county can play a role facilitating affordable rental production by conducting outreach to successful LIHTC

developers who have executed projects in rural locations like Vernon County.

**Single family housing.** There are two primary opportunities for the county to help facilitate more single-family construction. As was described earlier, the county can help its municipalities plan, design, and fund land development (through grant applications to state and federal programs) to make single family lots available to area builders. This could include activities such as grant writing, developer recruitment, partnering on a housing study, or providing technical assistance.

**Manufactured housing discussion.**

Manufactured (or modular) housing has historically played an important role in providing affordable housing, especially in rural areas. Unfortunately, in the past the quality of construction was not always consistent, and the industry suffered under a misconception that its units are of lower quality than traditional stick-built housing. However, modular housing can play an important role in addressing the county’s housing needs at a range of price points. Well designed and constructed modular homes can be delivered and installed cost effectively when compared to traditional on-site single family home construction.

Recognizing this, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

recently proposed updates to its modular housing guidelines aimed at “fostering increased production and broader consumer acceptance of manufactured housing as a viable, affordable, and comparable alternative to a site-built home.” These updates address a number of issues including:

- Materials that facilitate modern design approaches and improve quality
- Multi-unit manufactured homes
- Open floor plans, truss designs, and specifications for attics
- Accessibility improvements

Wisconsin is home to several modular home builders, including companies such as Stratford Homes in Stratford and MidCountry Homes in Dorchester. While modular builders frequently works with local contractors to meet the needs of individual homeowners, they also partner with developers to deliver larger number of units. The company is currently providing townhomes for [Oak Creek Commons](#), a master planned community in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

The county could help stimulate more housing production by encouraging local contractors and municipalities to embrace modular home construction, while educating the general public about its benefits.

# APPENDIX C: TOURISM MARKET ANALYSIS

Vernon county lies in the heart of Wisconsin’s Driftless Region, a scenic part of Wisconsin with small farms, forested hills, and crystal streams running through narrow valleys. Tourists are drawn to the area mostly for diverse outdoor recreational pursuits centered on state and county parks, or other recreational areas, and on its lake, rivers, and trails. Their spending is an important source of revenue for local businesses and for the County, but the full potential for tourism in the area is not being met.

## Visitor impact

The State of Wisconsin commissions an annual study to measure the economic impact of tourism statewide and by individual county. This research estimates \$49.4 million in direct tourism spending in Vernon County, increasing from \$44.8 million in 2021. The total economic impact was \$73 million in 2022, compared to \$66 million a year before. That economic impact includes spending, wages for tourism-related jobs, and \$4.4 million in state and local tax collections. In

2022, tourism supported 506 full-time equivalent jobs with \$13.7 million in wages.

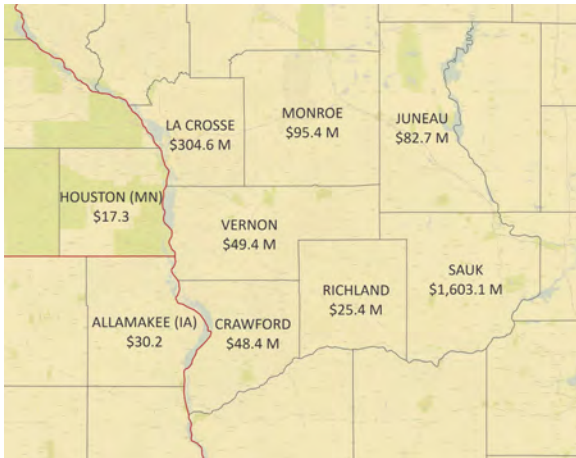
Vernon County is bordered by six Wisconsin counties, and one each in Minnesota and Iowa. Half of these counties, all in Wisconsin, see more direct visitor spending. These are led by Sauk County, which is only surpassed by Milwaukee County. Several factors help these neighboring counties capture more spending, including Devil’s Lake and the Wisconsin Dells in Sauk County, Castle Rock Lake and Petenwell Lake in Juneau County, Fort McCoy and rail trails in Monroe County, and the LaCrosse area in LaCrosse County. Interstate highways in all four counties also contribute to visitor volume, enhancing accessibility and bringing transient traffic.

## Tourism assets

Vernon County’s core tourism assets are centered on outdoor recreation, but also include the Amish and Mennonite culture, which is somewhat unique within Wisconsin.

**Natural areas.** Wildcat Mountain State Park and the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, as contiguous sites, make up one of the largest public natural areas in southern Wisconsin. They contain over 50 miles of trails for hiking, biking, equestrian, and winter sports use. Picnic areas, scenic overlooks, and developed campgrounds are located in Wildcat Mountain, while the Kickapoo Valley Reserve has several undeveloped and backcountry camping sites. There are visitor centers with interpretive resources at both parks. There is an active effort to have the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, Wildcat Mountain State Park, and Tunnel Cliffs designated an International Dark Sky Park.

2022 DIRECT VISITOR SPENDING BY COUNTY





In 2023 the Old Highway 131 Trail was designated a National Scenic Trail. It is approximately 4.5 miles long and connects to other trails in the Kickapoo Valley Reserve. Despite being adjacent, there are no trail connections between the Kickapoo Valley Reserve and Wildcat Mountain State Park. A larger goal might be to connect these two parks via multi-use trail systems to the Elroy-Sparta Trail in Wilton.

Tunnel Cliffs State Natural Area is located along the Kickapoo River south of La Farge. Managed by the Mississippi Valley Conservancy, it has minimal facilities or trails.

Jersey Valley County Park is a 371-acre site near Westby, with a 52-acre lake, beach, hiking trails, and basic facilities. Sidie Hollow County Park is the largest of the County's parks, with 521 acres containing a 32-acre lake, campground, hiking and mountain biking trails, and basic facilities. Recent improvements to Esofea County Park on the North Fork of the Bad Axe are also supporting the growth of the area's nature-based economy.

Battle Bluff Prairie State Natural Area, Blackhawk County Park, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Blackhawk Park are clustered on the Mississippi River north of DeSoto. Battle Bluff is the site of a battle in the Blackhawk War of 1832, with a commemorative plaque along Highway 35. There is a parking area and primitive trails on the bluff. The two Blackhawk Parks both contain campgrounds and boat launches. The County's park has a concession and boat slips.

Duck Egg County Forest and Eagle Eye State Natural Area are located along branches of the Bad Axe River, a trout stream. Seven Native American effigy mounds are found on the south face of Eagle Eye. They include a bear, panther, turtle, and two bird effigy

mounds and two linear mounds dating to ca. 1050 AD. Eagle Eye is owned by the Mississippi Valley Conservancy and was designated a State Natural Area in 2016. The county forest has more developed recreational facilities including ten miles of horse and pedestrian trails.

Many of these and other natural areas in Vernon County permit a great range of outdoor recreational activities such as road and mountain bicycling, hiking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, snowmobiling, hunting and fishing, wildlife watching, boating, and horseback riding.

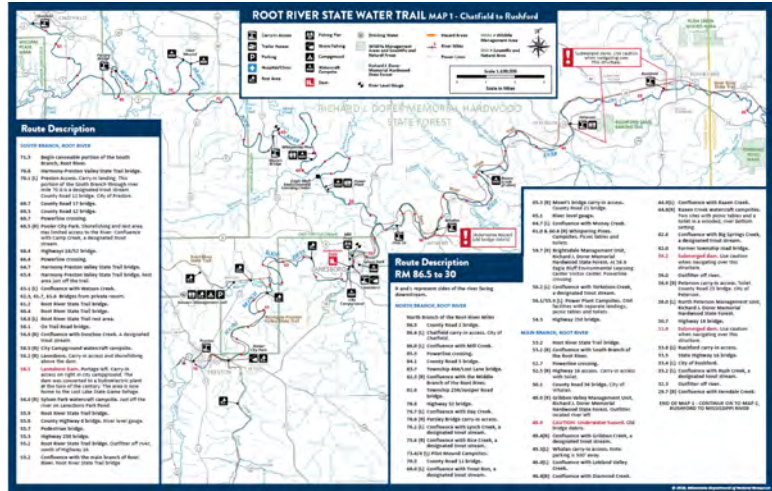
**Trout Streams.** Some of the driftless area's best trout streams are located in Vernon County. Esofea/Rentz Memorial provides a high-quality camping experience with excellent trout fishing in a scenic valley. A recent study estimated that fishing brings in over \$1.6 billion per year to the region. That same study showed that anglers top preference for lodging was camping (34.7 percent of respondents).

#### DRIFTLESS ANGLER, DOWNTOWN VIROQUA



MINNESOTA'S ROOT RIVER WATER TRAIL

**Kickapoo River.** The Kickapoo River flows through rural farmland and significant conservation lands as it passes through Vernon County. It is a popular paddling route and a handful of outfitters are located in the county. Several landings and campsites are located along the river. Despite its popularity, the asset is not well interpreted or marketed. In contrast, the nearby Root River in Minnesota is a State Water Trail and there is extensive online information to help people plan a river trip.



**Mississippi River.** The Great River Road passes through Vernon County. Stretching from the river's origin in Minnesota to its terminus in Louisiana, the route is among the nation's most popular auto tours. Several overlooks are found in Vernon County. The Great River Road Interpretive Center and Genoa National Fish Hatchery contain exhibits interpreting the river and its mostly aquatic wildlife, and allow visitors to see how threatened species are being raised and introduced into the river.

**Amish and Mennonite Culture.** There is a large Amish and Mennonite population in the north-central part of Vernon County. Many of these families have small lumber production, furniture-making, food-related, or other businesses that have potential to become a significant attraction, similar to comparable sites in Indiana or Ohio, or the Amana Colonies in Iowa. Both the resources and marketing are underdeveloped.

Interest in the products offered by these communities is high, but little is being done to reach potential customers. Aside from mentions that there are businesses in the area, there is no listing, map, touring route, wayfinding signage, or other tools to educate

and direct potential customers. Most of the existing operations are small in scale. The area lacks larger businesses, such as furniture stores, that might aggregate products made by local crafters. This could be an opportunity for a business outside of the Amish community as well, curating art, crafts, specialty food products, furniture, and other locally-made goods.

**Motorcycle touring.** The scenic and winding roads of the county have made it a destination for motorcycle touring. Some businesses in the area are catering to these tourists, but there has not been an effort to promote the activity as a form of tourism.

**Bicycle trails.** Three state trails lie entirely or partially within Vernon County. They are the Hillsboro State Trail, connecting Hillsboro to the "400" State Trail, the Old Highway 131 Trail, and the Pine River Trail, linking Richland Center to Lone Rock. The Wisconsin State Trails Network Plan (currently being updated in 2023) shows proposed trails along the Mississippi River, and linking Richland Center and Hillsboro. A link to the Old Highway 131 Trail might also be considered, continuing roughly along the highway to the Elroy-Sparta Trail in Wilton.





**Nearby attractions.** Several significant attractions are located in close proximity to Vernon County. Bundling these with attractions in Vernon County can be a means to promote more, and longer visits to the area. Visitors to some of these attractions may also be targets for attraction to sites in Vernon County. Some of the more important nearby attractions include:

- Buckhorn State Park
- Devil’s Lake State Park
- Effigy Mounds National Monument (Iowa)
- Elroy-Sparta State Trail, La Crosse River State Trail, Great River Trail, and 400 Trail
- Great River Bluffs State Park (Minnesota)
- Mt. La Crosse Ski Area
- Norskedalen Nature and Heritage Center
- Wisconsin Dells area attractions
- Wisconsin River
- Yellow River State Forest (Iowa)

## Tourism marketing

Tourism marketing is carried out by both tourism promotion organizations such as chambers of commerce, and by individual businesses deriving significant traffic from visitors. At the organizational level, significant changes have been made to improve marketing in the past few years, though both organizations and businesses are behind in adopting modern approaches.

Driftless Wisconsin is a regional tourism organization covering Vernon and Crawford Counties. Its website is listed first when searching for Wisconsin’s driftless region. Its Facebook page has over 21,000 followers and

ONE OF MANY AMISH OR MENNONITE SHOPS



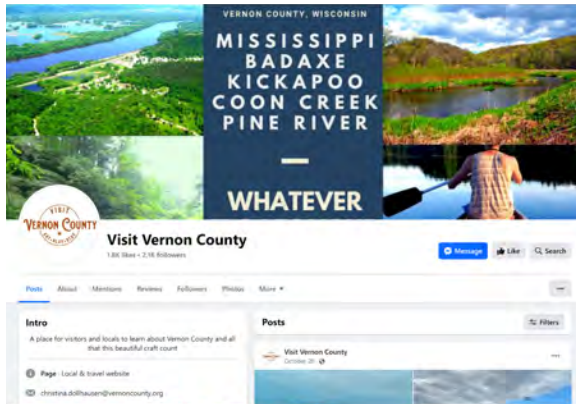
there are nearly 7,000 on Instagram, but posting to these sites is no more frequent than about one every week.

Over the past several decades there has been on-and-off efforts to establish a regional organization to promoting tourism to the driftless area, recognizing that as a region, it has greater potential than any individual community or county. Hidden Valleys is a private organization that publishes a printed guide under the same name, covering a eight-county region. Although there is an accompanying website, it does not appear in most searches for information about the region. Associated social media is frequently updated. While Facebook has over 6,000 followers, there are only about 150 on Instagram.

Driftless Area Magazine is a private venture, now solely online, that covers parts of all four states and is supported through advertising revenue. It has a high ranking in searches.

The internet has become the dominant means of finding information about potential destinations, whether through web searches, map searches, or increasingly, applications developed around specific interests.

## VERNON COUNTY TOURISM FACEBOOK PAGE



Vernon County does have its own tourism website and some of the local communities have minimal sites of their own. The county site is less developed than Driftless Wisconsin. Its Facebook page has about 2,000 followers, while there are roughly 1,000 on Instagram, but postings on either site are infrequent, and there is no supporting information on the site.

Aside from the website for Driftless Wisconsin, top sites for searches on the driftless area are mostly private, including an article from Milwaukee Magazine that features many Vernon County attractions, though most other sites are focused elsewhere.

Sites like Trip.com and Yelp miss some of the more important visitor experiences or businesses in the county, and may even be pitching sites outside of the county. For example, Wyalusing State Park is the second-highest site listed for Vernon County, while neither Wildcat Mountain State Park or the Kickapoo Valley Reserve are listed. Even within searches for the county, paid advertising includes ads for Bayfield, Northcentral Wisconsin, and Chippewa County, which is featured for its trails.

Topical searches and applications designed for specific activities produce mixed results for Vernon County. AllTrails is the top-ranked

application for hiking, and has a good representation of the county's trails, while The Hiking Project lists only two. Sites like TripAdvisor do not list any Vernon County trails among 132 listed trails in Wisconsin. Wisconsin Explorer lists several. None of the top online articles about fall hiking listed any sites in Vernon County.

The situation for canoeing and kayaking is better. The Kickapoo River is listed second after the Wisconsin River on the State's tourism page. The Kickapoo River is also listed in Miles Paddled, where river sections have four- or five-star ratings. Paddle Wisconsin provides a complete directory of river access points for rivers throughout the state, including the Kickapoo River. In searches for canoeing the river, though, the top ads are for the Wisconsin River and Black River Falls.

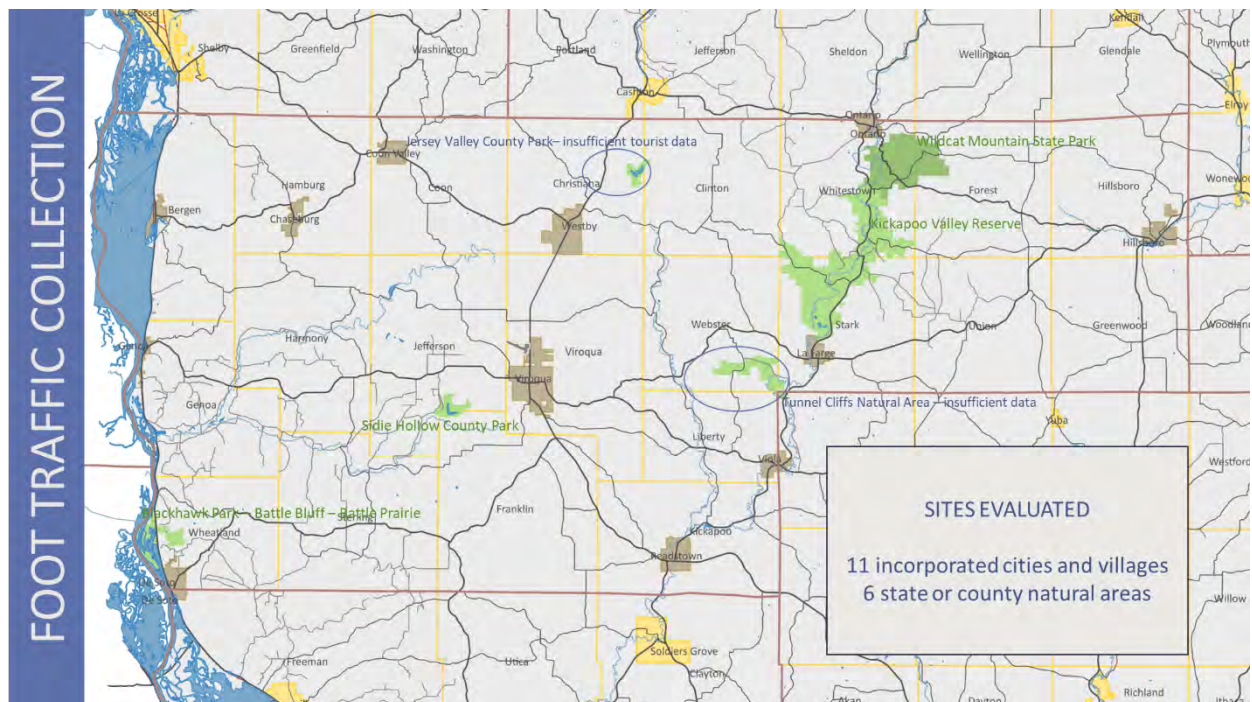
## DRIFTLESS WISCONSIN BRAND LOGO



## Visitor traffic

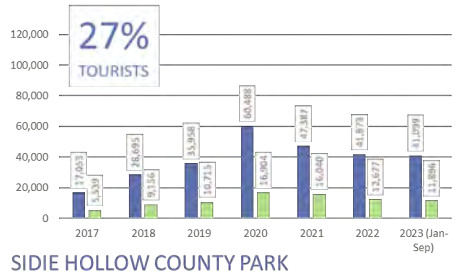
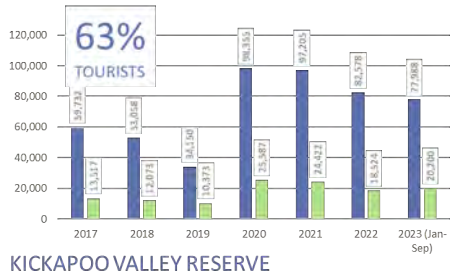
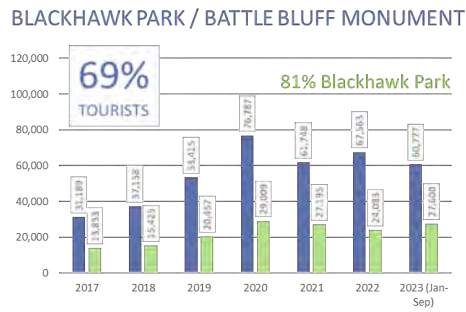
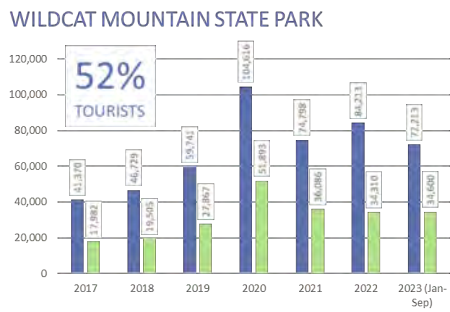
Mobile device tracking was used to understand visitor patterns, origins, and demographic or psychographic composition. This data was collected for several natural areas and for the eleven incorporated cities and villages in the county. Natural areas included Wildcat Mountain State Park, Kickapoo Valley Reserve, Sidie Hollow County Park, and the aggregated areas of Blackhawk Park, Battle Bluff, and Battle Prairie State Natural Areas. There was insufficient data for Tunnel Cliffs Natural Area and Jersey Valley County Park, due to low visitor volume.

**Overall and tourist traffic.** Overall visits and tourist visits peaked in 2020 and have since receded to levels mostly still above pre-pandemic volumes. The pandemic-era peak





TOTAL FOOT TRAFFIC



TOTAL VISITORS  
UNIQUE VISITORS

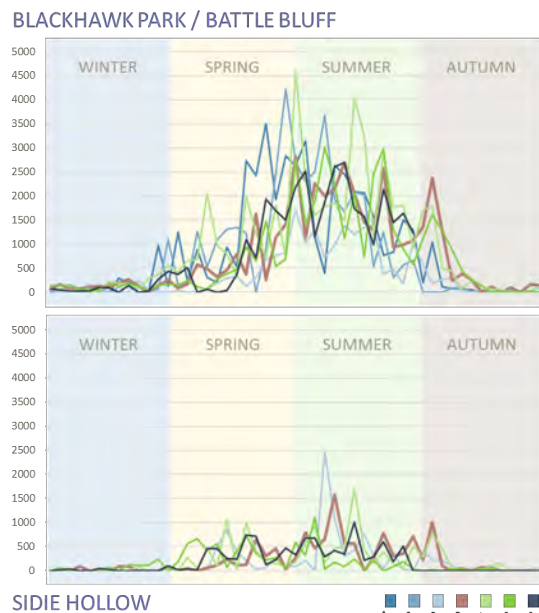
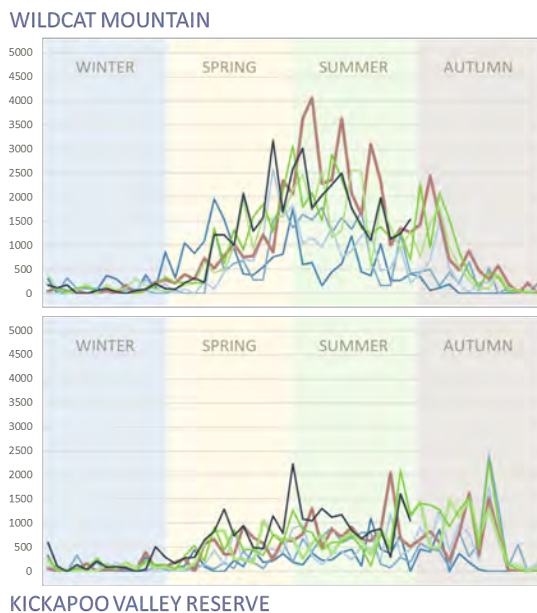
and subsequent drop is common for outdoor attractions across the country.

More than half of all visitors to three of the four natural areas are tourists, defined as someone whose home is at least 50 miles

from the site. This definition is commonly used in the tourism industry.

Blackhawk Park, Battle Bluff, and Battle Prairie has the highest percentage of tourists, at 69 percent, likely due to the prominence of its campgrounds and boat launches as park

WEEKLY TOURIST TRAFFIC



features. Over 60,000 total visits are recorded at these parks annually, from about 27,000 unique visitors. About 9,000 tourists are making roughly 35,000 annual visits. These are smaller numbers than in the pandemic years or prior. Tourists are also making fewer return trips to the parks.

Wildcat Mountain State Park and the Kickapoo Valley Reserve see similar total visits, but Wildcat Mountain draws more tourists. Wildcat Mountain is averaging about 75,000 to 80,000 annual visits, with about 40,000 tourist visits in that total. The typical tourist is visiting twice in the course of a year. While overall visitor volume is similar in the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, there are only about 25,000 annual tourist visits. Again, the typical tourist is visiting about twice during the year.

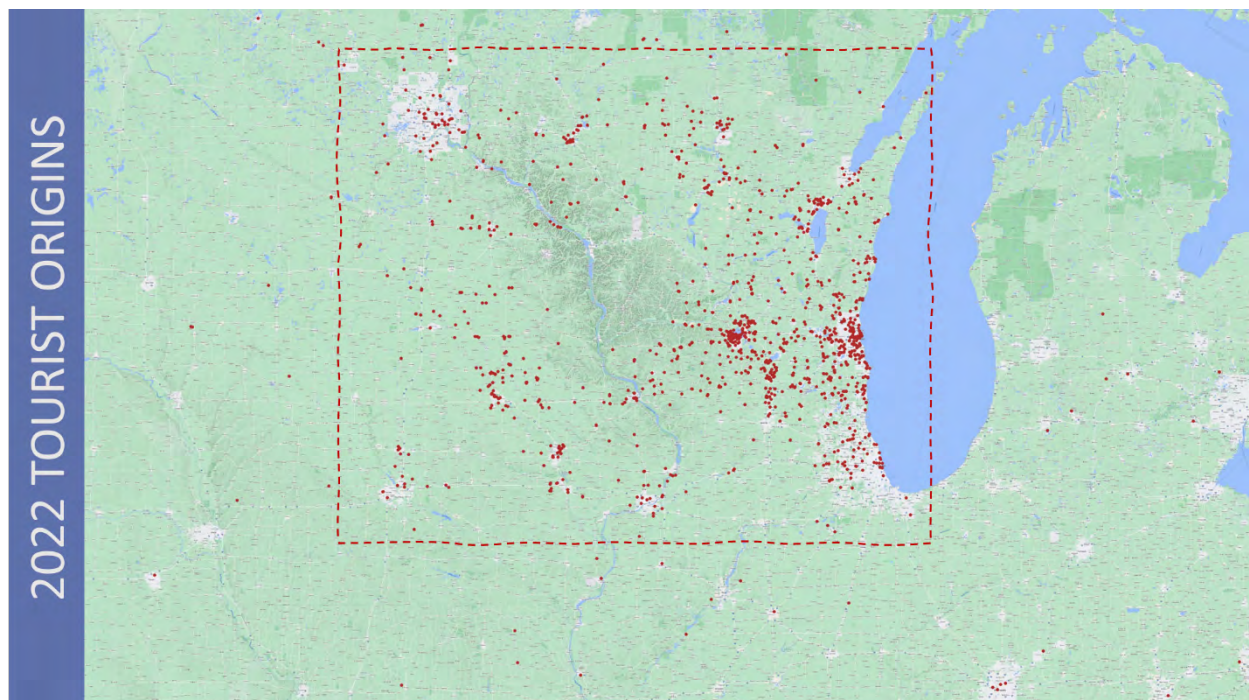
Sidie Hollow County Park has the lowest volume of visits and tourists. About a quarter of the 40,000 annual visits to the park are made by tourists, with the typical tourist making about three visits per year.

The breakdown of tourist visits compared to overall visitation suggests a lack of familiarity with these resources in the broader market, especially given the volume of tourist traffic to nearby parks like Devil’s Lake State Park and Mirror Lake State Park. Targeted marketing has the potential to draw more tourists to the county’s natural areas.

**Seasonal patterns.** There is a similar pattern of visits across all of the natural areas. Volume drops off in autumn and remains low until spring, rising to a peak in late spring and summer. There is a small increase in early autumn associated with fall colors.

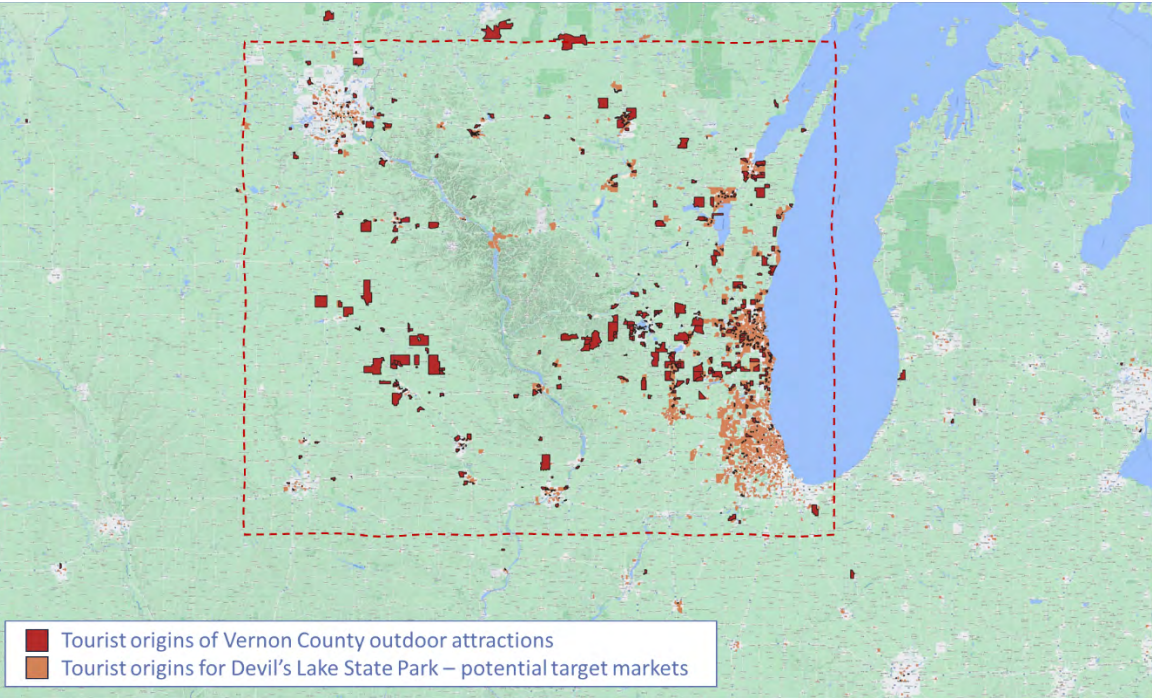
Subtle differences can be seen among these areas. Both Blackhawk Park and Sidie Hollow County Park have campgrounds whose seasonal closures contribute to a drop in visitor numbers. Auto tourism and boating are also very seasonal, contributing to the patterns observed at Blackhawk Park.

Hunting contributes significantly to the large number of autumn visitors seen at Kickapoo Valley Reserve. Many of these hunters may be





## OPPORTUNITY MARKETS



staying at the campground in Wildcat Mountain State Park. The Kickapoo Valley Reserve does not see the same summer peak as other parks, while higher numbers in spring and early summer may be associated with paddling on the Kickapoo River.

These parks and other natural areas in Vernon County can support increased tourism throughout the year. Especially in the case of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, there is a lack of market familiarity with the park that causes it to see low visitor volumes in the peak summer months. Marketing efforts can also build off-season traffic, highlighting features such as ice caves.

**Tourist origins.** Vernon County draws most of its tourists from an area anchored in the southeast by the Chicago metropolitan area, and by the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area in the northwest. The Madison, Milwaukee, and Rockford-Janesville markets are among the places where visitors are more concentrated.

It is useful to compare Vernon County tourist origins to those of Devil's Lake State Park. Both areas draw similar demographic groups, but Devil's Lake State Park reaches a much larger market. Vernon County has the potential to reach travelers from these same market areas, if it can successfully market the county's assets and value proposition.

**Tourist market segments.** Market segmentation is a technique in which people are aggregated into groups sharing similar lifestyle and demographic attributes. Comparing their representation among visitors to the county to their concentration in the overall population makes it possible to identify core segments (those most important to the area's tourism), niche segments (small segments that are effectively captured), expansion segments (large segments that are not being reached), and low value segments (small segments that are not being reached).

The segments that are effectively reached are among the more desirable ones, tending to be among the more affluent households. They include a mix of both younger to older



# TOURIST MARKET SEGMENTS

This chart compares the share of each market segment in the **market** (250-mile radius), and **trade area** (Census block groups from which tourists were captured), to the national distribution.

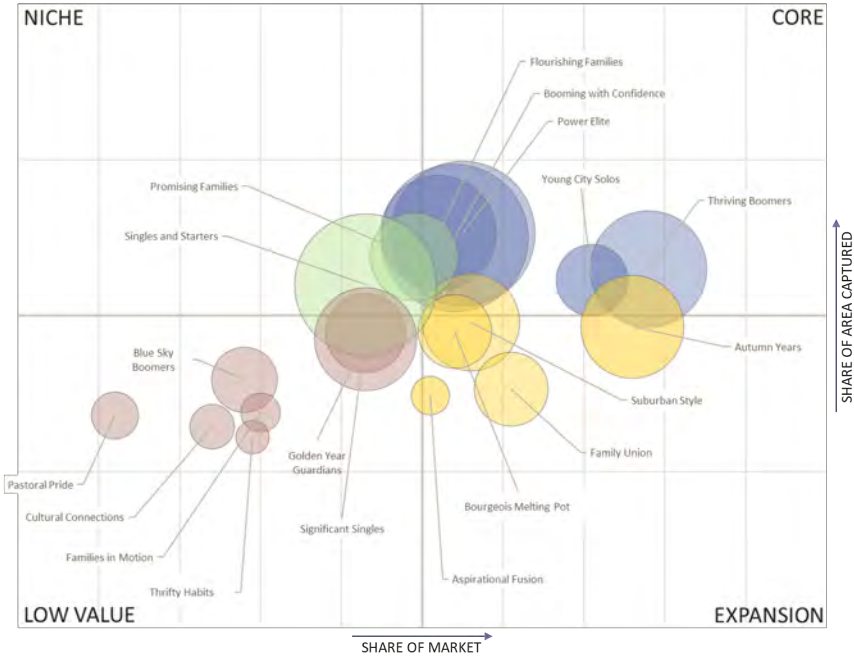
**CORE** segments are over-represented in the both their trade area and market distribution.

**NICHE** segments are over-represented in the trade area but under-represented in the market.

**EXPANSION** segments are over-represented in the market and under-represented in the trade area.

**LOW VALUE** segments are under-represented in both the market and the trade area.

Segments attracted to the area tend to have higher incomes and live in suburban locations.



households. Information about the market segments and methods by which segments are defined can be found online at <https://assets.cengage.com/gale/help/dnow/Mosaic/AboutMosaic.pdf>.

Tourists visiting Vernon County tend to be white (81.3 percent), with a median age of 39.6 years. In the larger market, defined by a 250 mile radius from the county, white households make up 71.6 percent of the total, while the median age is similar at 40.2 years. Vernon County’s tourists have a median income of \$80,840, compared to \$72,875 for the larger market. Tourists are also better educated, with 42.7 percent holding at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to 35.0 percent of the larger market.

Visitor recreational interests. Information about the recreational interests of a market population, based on its demographic composition, is provided by ESRI in the form of a market potential index. A value of 100 is the national average, and an index higher than 100 indicates a greater level of interest. Tourists visiting Vernon County show a high

level of interest in outdoor recreational activities, with the following indices.

This information can help local tourism development organizations or individual businesses identify groups to which it can market or prioritize activities and investments

MARKET POTENTIAL INDEX	
ACTIVITY	INDEX
Archery	111
Backpacking	113
Mountain biking	109
Road biking	106
Boating	112
Canoeing / kayaking	113
Fresh water fishing	109
Hiking	108
Horseback riding	104
Hunting with rifle	104
Hunting with shotgun	107
Motorcycling	107
Rock climbing	108
Downhill skiing	113
Target shooting	110



to make the area more attractive to its core audiences.

## Competitive destinations

It is possible to track other places frequented by the same people making visits to Vernon County’s outdoor recreation sites. Examining these sites may help to create a better understanding of what features or activities visitors may find appealing, with implications for both marketing and asset development. Some cross-marketing may be possible, and consideration can be given to advertising in publications featuring these competitive sites. Their visitors may be converted to future Vernon County tourists.

The top destinations for each of the four natural areas are identified, along with the percentage of visitors to the Vernon County site who also make a visit to the competitor site during the year.

It is worth noting that very few of the trips to competitor destinations occur immediately before or after visits to Vernon County destinations, but at other times during the year.

## Business visits

Tourists to Vernon County’s destinations are making stops at businesses en route, or during their stay. These can be observed using mobile device tracking to capture business visits made either directly before or after a visit to one of the destinations. These visits commonly involve trips for food, gas, or specialty shopping.

### BLACKHAWK PARK – BATTLE BLUFF

▪ Governor Dodge State Park	4.9%
▪ Devil’s Lake State Park	4.6%
▪ Grandad Bluff Park	4.0%
▪ Mt. Rushmore National Monument	3.5%
▪ Peninsula State Park	3.1%
▪ Kettle Moraine State Forest – North	3.0%
▪ Harrington Beach State Park	3.0%
▪ Wildcat Mountain State Park	2.6%
▪ Wyalusing State Park	2.5%
▪ Backbone State Park (IA)	2.5%

### KICKAPOO VALLEY RESERVE

▪ Wildcat Mountain State Park	27.4%
▪ Devil’s Lake State Park	9.3%
▪ Kettle Moraine State Forest – South	6.5%
▪ Governor Dodge State Park	4.5%
▪ Peninsula State Park	4.3%
▪ Kettle Moraine State Forest – North	3.8%
▪ Starved Rock State Park (IL)	3.2%
▪ Mirror Lake State Park	3.1%
▪ Wyalusing State Park	3.0%
▪ High Cliff State Park	3.0%

### SIDIE HOLLOW COUNTY PARK

▪ Kickapoo Valley Reserve	10.6%
▪ Devil’s Lake State Park	9.0%
▪ Whitefish Dunes State Park	5.6%
▪ Blue Mound State Park	5.5%
▪ Peninsula State Park	5.5%
▪ Mirror Lake State Park	5.4%
▪ Pheasant Branch Conservancy	5.0%
▪ Kettle Moraine State Forest – South	5.0%
▪ Capitol Springs State Rec. Area	4.7%
▪ Wyalusing State Park	4.4%

### WILDCAT MOUNTAIN STATE PARK

▪ Devil’s Lake State Park	14.2%
▪ Kickapoo Valley Reserve	13.9%
▪ Governor Dodge State Park	13.6%
▪ Kettle Moraine State Forest – South	9.6%
▪ Mirror Lake State Park	7.4%
▪ Kettle Moraine State Forest – North	7.0%
▪ Peninsula State Park	6.7%
▪ Kohler-Andrae State Park	6.6%
▪ High Cliff State Park	6.0%
▪ Harrington Beach State Park	5.2%

Stops for food include grocery purchases and visits to restaurants. Most groceries are purchased en route to the destination, while restaurant visits occur after. Walmart and the Viroqua Food Co-op are the primary grocery stops, although many trips to gas/ convenience stores may also include food purchases. Several local restaurants see good tourism traffic, including Rockton Bar (La Farge), Riversend Bar & Grill (Ontario), Great River Roadhouse (De Soto), The Bright Spot (De Soto), Wildcat Bar & Grill (Ontario), and Wonderstate Coffee (Viroqua).

Some of the specialty shopping destinations favored by tourists include Reel Brothers Harley-Davidson (Mauston), Blackhawk Trading Post (De Soto), Cabela's (Prairie du Chien), and Horsfall Landing Variety Store (Lansing). The High ranking of Reel brothers attests to the popularity of motorcycle touring.

A large number of visits are also made to outfitters offering canoe livery services on the Kickapoo River.

#### TOURIST VISITS TO LOCAL BUSINESSES

BUSINESS / DESTINATION	CITY	TOTAL VISITS	WILDCAT MOUNTAIN	SIDIE HOLLOW	KICKAPOO VALLEY	BLACKHAWK PARK	BEFORE	AFTER
Rockton Bar	La Farge	6032	1629	0	4403	0	31.9%	68.1%
Wildcat Mountain State Park	Ontario	5889	0	0	5889	0	59.9%	40.1%
Reel Brothers Harley-Davidson	Mauston	4636	233	0	4403	0	36.2%	63.8%
Kickapoo Valley Reserve	La Farge	4211	4130	81	0	0	33.4%	66.6%
Kickapoo River	Ontario	2745	2161	137	447	0	42.7%	57.3%
Walmart	Viroqua	2710	523	1017	973	197	54.2%	45.8%
Riversend Bar & Grill	Ontario	2662	2095	127	440	0	46.1%	53.9%
Great River Roadhouse	De Soto	2237	0	0	37	2200	47.3%	52.7%
Blackhawk Trading Post	De Soto	1565	0	0	0	1565	47.7%	52.3%
Cabela's Distribution Center	Pr. Chien	1517	0	0	57	1460	51.1%	48.9%
The Bright Spot	De Soto	1401	0	0	0	1401	51.3%	48.7%
Wildcat Bar and Grill	Ontario	1392	1326	0	66	0	38.2%	61.8%
Walmart	La Crosse	1320	77	44	0	1199	66.8%	33.2%
Pronto	De Soto	1064	23	29	0	1012	51.6%	48.4%
Wonderstate Coffee	Viroqua	996	158	192	479	167	27.0%	73.0%
Shep's Riverside Bar & Grill	Lansing	969	0	0	76	893	42.3%	57.7%
Viroqua Food	Viroqua	964	174	456	334	0	50.5%	49.5%
Park	Ontario	924	766	0	158	0	56.0%	44.0%
Kickapoo Wild Adventures	Ontario	809	553	0	256	0	44.3%	55.7%
Titanic Canoe Rental	Ontario	799	757	0	42	0	35.0%	65.0%
Mr Duck's Canoe Rental	Ontario	794	628	0	119	47	53.9%	46.1%
Horsfall Lansing Variety Store	Lansing	729	0	0	0	729	35.5%	64.5%
Mount Hosmer Park	Lansing	649	0	0	0	649	44.7%	55.3%
Mill Bluff State Park	Camp Douglas	594	594	0	0	0	35.0%	65.0%
Viroqua Family Restaurant	Viroqua	593	90	303	55	145	20.2%	79.8%
Kwik Trip	Hillsboro	560	560	0	0	0	60.0%	40.0%
Zzip Stop	La Farge	535	0	0	495	40	15.7%	84.3%
Pork's Bar	De Soto	533	0	0	0	533	31.3%	68.7%
Lake Redstone County Park	La Valle	526	407	0	119	0	57.6%	42.4%

TOURIST VISITS TO LOCAL BUSINESSES (continued)

BUSINESS / DESTINATION	CITY	TOTAL VISITS	WILDCAT MOUNTAIN	SIDIE HOLLOW	KICKAPOO VALLEY	BLACKHAWK PARK	BEFORE	AFTER
Kwik Trip	Viroqua	523	76	227	180	40	64.8%	35.2%
Kwik Trip	Lansing	513	0	0	55	458	60.8%	39.2%
Rudy's Bar and Hotel	Genoa	475	0	49	0	426	55.4%	44.6%
Grandad Bluff Park	La Crosse	466	0	0	0	466	26.8%	73.2%
Tuna's Bar	Genoa	463	0	0	0	463	50.1%	49.9%
Culver's	Viroqua	462	97	197	0	168	32.0%	68.0%
Wildthings Fur	La Farge	449	173	0	276	0	84.9%	15.1%
Ewetopia Fiber Shop	Viroqua	428	48	289	91	0	40.4%	59.6%
Skinny Dip	Lansing	420	0	0	0	420	18.8%	81.2%
Walmart	Wisconsin Dells	401	104	44	253	0	100.0%	0.0%
Walmart	Sparta	395	355	0	40	0	53.2%	46.8%
Central Express	Cashton	382	382	0	0	0	30.1%	69.9%
KFC	Tomah	373	373	0	0	0	14.2%	85.8%
Down A Country Road Amish Gifts & Tours	Cashton	331	331	0	0	0	40.2%	59.8%
UW - La Crosse	La Crosse	331	267	0	0	64	29.9%	70.1%
The Driftless Cafe	Viroqua	324	88	159	55	22	38.6%	61.4%
La Farge Motel	La Farge	322	0	0	322	0	20.2%	79.8%
BP	La Valle	307	67	0	240	0	9.8%	90.2%
Kwik Trip	Wisconsin Dells	301	301	0	0	0	55.1%	44.9%
CBD and Delta 8 Boutique	Viroqua	300	101	21	145	33	18.0%	82.0%
Elroy Sparta Bike Trail	N/A	296	296	0	0	0	11.5%	88.5%
Norwegian Hollow Hideaway	Viroqua	293	0	155	42	96	40.6%	59.4%
Hillsboro Drive In, LLC	Hillsboro	279	186	0	93	0	0.0%	100.0%
Laundry Express	La Crosse	273	0	0	0	273	38.1%	61.9%
Dave's Pizza	Viroqua	271	0	201	70	0	70.5%	29.5%
Kwik Trip	Po Box 79	265	265	0	0	0	26.4%	73.6%
Love's Travel Stop	Oakdale	262	128	0	100	34	28.2%	71.8%
Walmart	Decorah	260	0	0	0	260	70.8%	29.2%
Phil & Deb's Town Tap	La Farge	259	30	0	150	79	42.1%	57.9%
Cenex	Wilton	257	66	41	150	0	24.9%	75.1%
Genoa Overlook	Stoddard	250	0	0	0	250	45.6%	54.4%



## APPENDIX D: COMMERCIAL MARKET ANALYSIS

The county's commercial sector is important in several ways. A healthy commercial sector provides the goods and services needed by local residents, without having to travel long distances. These businesses create jobs and generate sales tax revenue funding County operations. In many cases, local ownership offers a chance at entrepreneurship and wealth generation. Active downtown districts, meanwhile, act as the civic and social center of their communities.

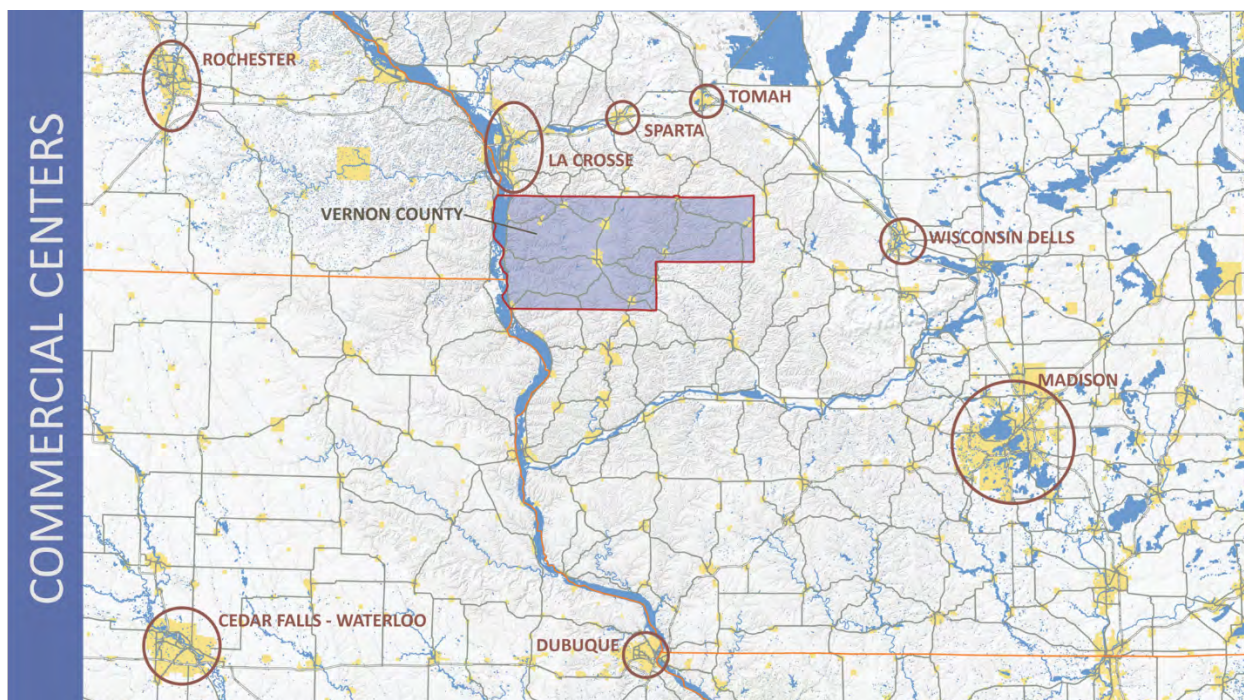
Markets do not follow political boundaries, and that is the case with Vernon County. The degree to which residents' needs for shopping and services are being met varies by their location. Those living near Viroqua and Westby have greater access to a variety of businesses not found near smaller communities. County residents are forced to go out of the county for higher-order retail and services, and some residents leave the county even for basic needs.

Conditions found in Vernon County are not unusual among similarly-situated counties.

### Setting and overview

Vernon County is situated in the heart of the Driftless Area. The area's hilly terrain shaped its settlement as a mostly agricultural area with small communities connected by two-lane roads winding over hills and through narrow valleys. Viroqua is the largest community and the county seat, with a 2023 population of 4,423. Nearby Westby is the next-largest community, with a 2023 population of 2,370. The small size of many communities makes it difficult to support even the most basic commercial businesses.

The county is surrounded by larger commercial centers that offer both competition and access to higher-order goods and services. These centers also draw customers from small communities and rural



areas to the south, which might otherwise patronize businesses in Vernon County.

## Commercial hierarchy

There is a hierarchy to different types of commercial activity based on the market it serves. Commonly-used tiers include convenience, neighborhood, community, regional, and super-regional, with each serving a greater population and drawing more regionally.

- Convenience centers are often highway-oriented or found at intersections within urban areas. They include uses like gas stations and fast food restaurants.
- Neighborhood centers can serve a small community or neighborhood within a larger city. They are anchored by frequently-shopped store types like grocery stores, hardware stores, and pharmacies. Personal care services, medical or dental offices, and banks are some of the services that might be expected to be in these districts.
- Community centers can contain uses found in neighborhood centers, along with higher-order businesses like supercenters, home centers, and other big box stores.
- Regional centers expand the depth of specialty big box stores found in community centers, and usually include a regional shopping mall.

Viroqua contains the largest concentration of commercial activity in Vernon County, and is the county's only regional center. Businesses anchoring the city include a Walmart Supercenter, Tractor Supply Company, Quillen's (a grocery store), Viroqua Food Co-op, Walgreen's, and car dealerships. The Ford and Chevy dealers are uses more often found

in regional centers, but often seen at the community level in rural cities.

Vernon County's smaller communities often do not have even the anchor uses typical of neighborhood centers. Traditional grocery stores are found in Westby (Hansen's IGA) and Hillsboro (Country Market). There is a small store at Organic Valley in La Farge, and an Amish bulk food store outside of Ontario. Hardware stores are found in Westby, Viroqua, La Farge, and Hillsboro. The only pharmacies are in Viroqua, La Farge, and Hillsboro. For people in these and smaller communities, shopping will often require a journey to a larger community.

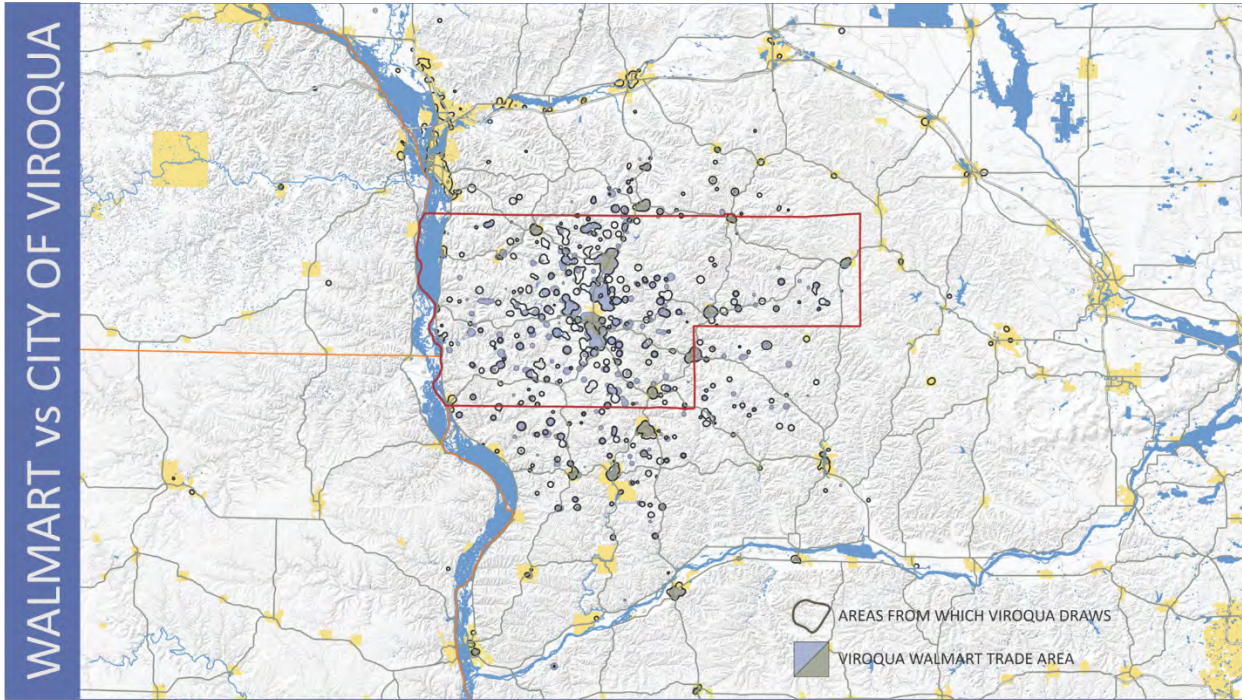
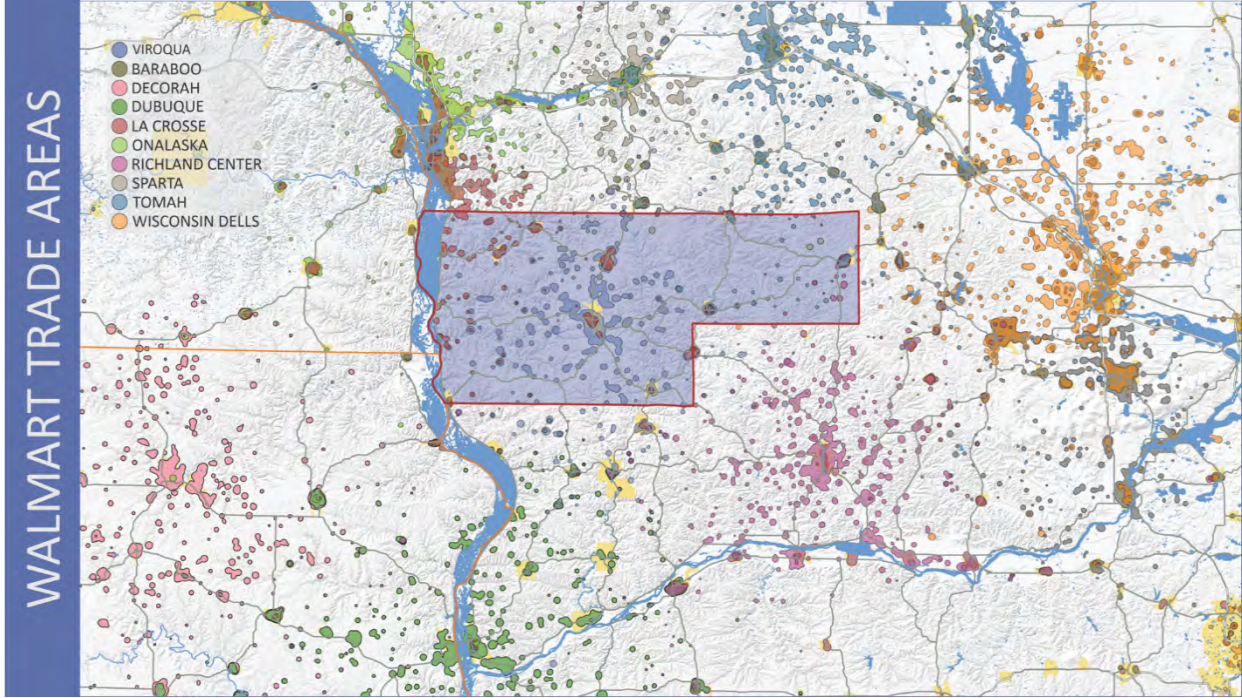
## Local market areas

Walmart's superstores are found almost universally within community centers, and mapping their individual trade areas will help to create a picture of local markets, overlap, and competition within a region.

The Walmart in Viroqua pulls most of its customers from the center of the county, and south to about Gays Mills. The La Crosse store draws heavily into the northwestern part of Vernon County and along the river. Sparta and Tomah stores define a market boundary along the county's northern edge, while the Wisconsin Dells and Richland Center stores compete in the eastern part of the county. The Dubuque Walmart's market defines Viroqua's southern market border.

While the Viroqua Walmart may have limited pull beyond the borders of Vernon County, the City of Viroqua is drawing people from a broader area. These visitors may be coming into the city for a variety of reasons such as work, social activities, or going to businesses other than Walmart. The area from which they are drawn might be considered a secondary market from which some businesses may be able to attract customers.





Examples might include restaurants or unique shops. This also represents an area from which people will be attracted to community events.

Among the county’s communities, Viroqua has the largest number of annual visits from

people living outside of the community, as determined through mobile device tracking. Several of the smaller communities are drawing from an area with nearly as many residents, though with a lower number of visits per person.



2022 VISITS AND TRADE AREA POPULATION

COMMUNITY	ANNUAL VISITS	TRADE AREA POPULATION
Chaseburg	83,100	25,711
Coon Valley	368,400	92,411
De Soto	279,600	116,859
Genoa	163,100	55,764
Hillsboro	798,000	77,741
La Farge	48,200	15,006
Ontario	34,200	8,126
Readstown	350,900	57,966
Stoddard	355,400	93,913
Viola	34,500	9,599
Viroqua	2,860,300	114,429
Westby	1,209,300	99,510

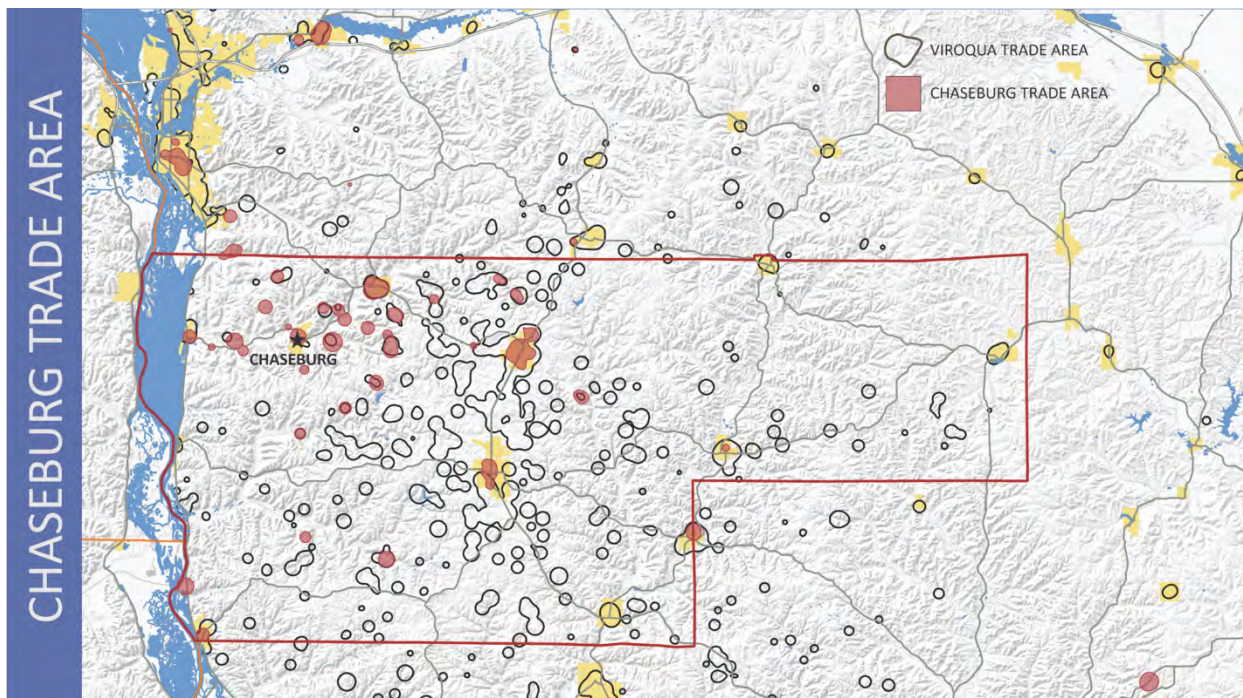
The trade areas of several Vernon County communities overlap, especially with that of Viroqua. This is to be expected, as Viroqua will be the first destination for many county residents who do not have groceries or general merchandise in their community. Viroqua also has county services, medical and professional services, and other activities that make it a destination for county residents.

Trade area data for some communities, like La Farge and Ontario, may be shaped by the Amish and Mennonite population in the vicinity, who do not own phones or often shop conventional stores, but will still make some trips into nearby cities or villages.

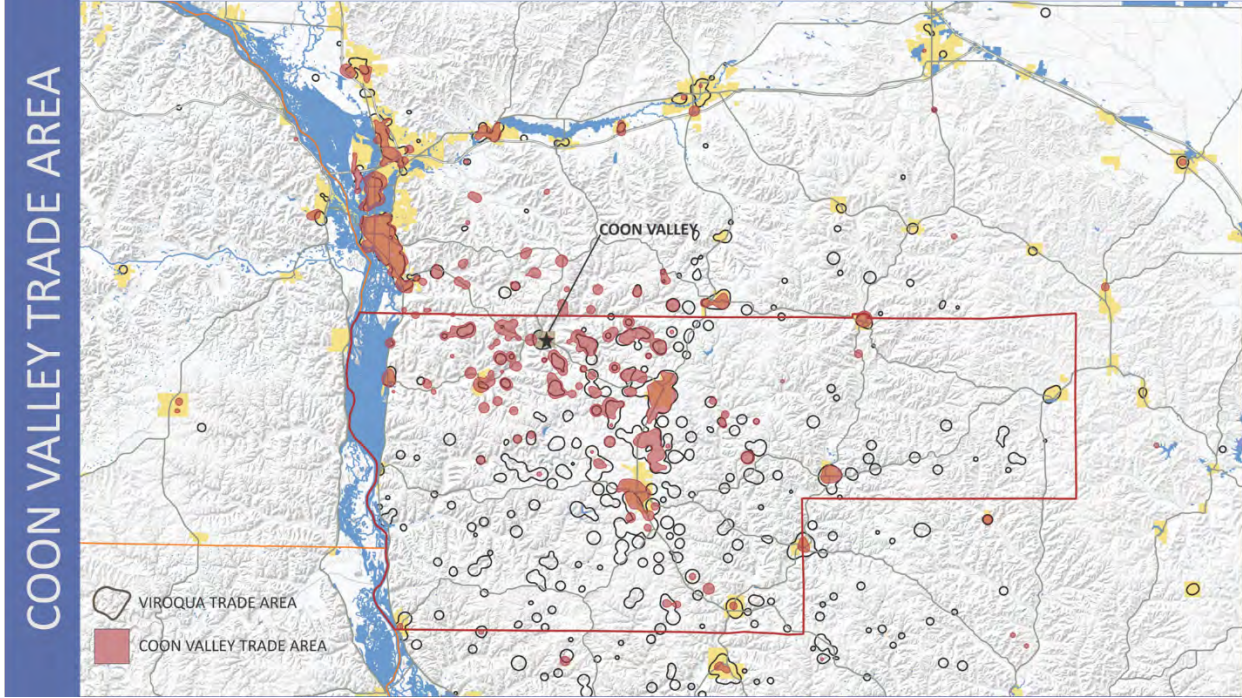
**Village of Chaseburg.** Most visits to Chaseburg originate in the immediate area, with some traffic from Westby, Viroqua, and a few places beyond. Chaseburg has few businesses aside from a gas station, a couple taverns, and a

lumberyard. The village is located on a lightly-traveled state highway. The small population, low volume of traffic, and lack of significant nearby attractions suggest few opportunities for commercial development.

**Village of Coon Valley.** Coon valley has a surprisingly large trade area for a community of its size. It is able to pull routine visitors from the Kickapoo Valley west to La Crosse. Its location along U.S. Highway 14 is certainly

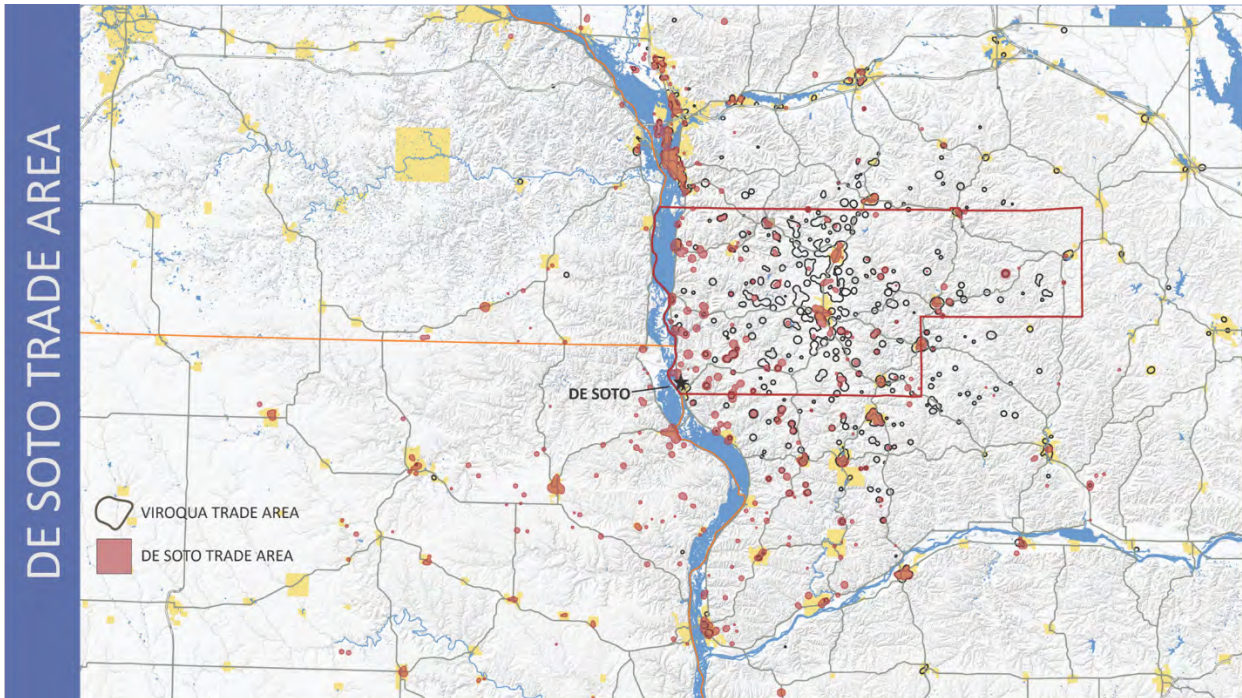






a factor, as people traveling to and from La Crosse, and places southeast of the city, will tend to use that route. The village has a handful of taverns and small shops, a gas station, and a small market. Some of the shops can appeal to visitors from outside the

area, and with Highway 14 bringing regional traffic through the community, this may offer an opportunity for similar businesses to be established. Sweet Valley Artisans offers booth space in which people may start a small





business with the potential to grow into its own space.

**Village of De Soto.** Though small, De Soto has a favorable location on State Highway 35, the Great River Road. The first river crossing south of La Crosse is located a mile south of the village. Blackhawk Park, a popular recreational site, is located just to the north. These factors help De Soto draw from a large area, north as far as La Crosse and Sparta, east to Richland Center, south to Prairie du Chien, and west well into Iowa.

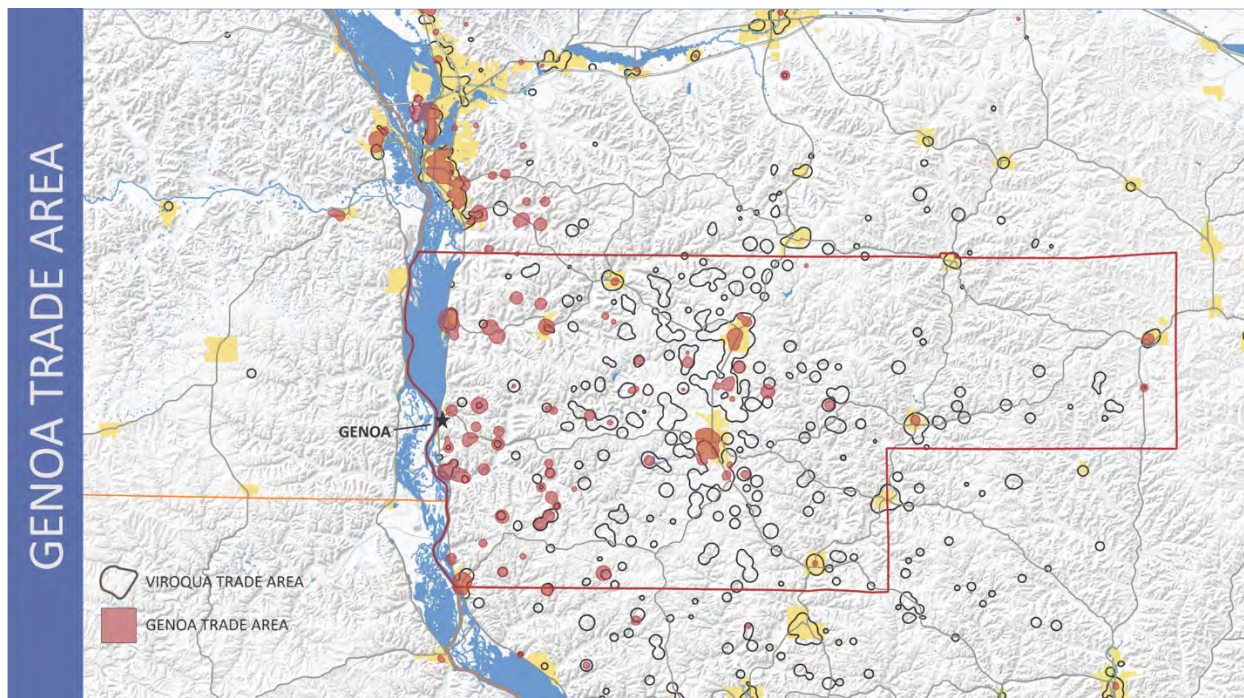
Despite its relatively large trade area, De Soto has few businesses. The seasonality of travel, associated with recreation along the river, is a probable explanation. De Soto is nevertheless a good convenience location, particularly with the river crossing.

**Village of Genoa.** Genoa has a small number of businesses including an antique store, bait and tackle shop, taverns, and a modern, though small gas station. The gas station is a destination frequented by visitors to Blackhawk Park. The trade area reflects

travel patterns in the region. There is a north and south orientation along Highway 35, and some areas to the east the would use Highway 56 and 162 to access Highway 35. The village serves as mostly a convenience stop with some tourist-oriented retail.

**City of Hillsboro.** Hillsboro is situated at the crossing of State Routes 33 and 80. The city is home to a small hospital and many associated health care services. The retail sector includes a market and hardware store, lumberyard, farm-related businesses, and tourist businesses like The Cheese Store and More. There are more restaurants and taverns than in smaller communities, with Hillsboro Brewing Company able to draw visitors as well as residents of the area.

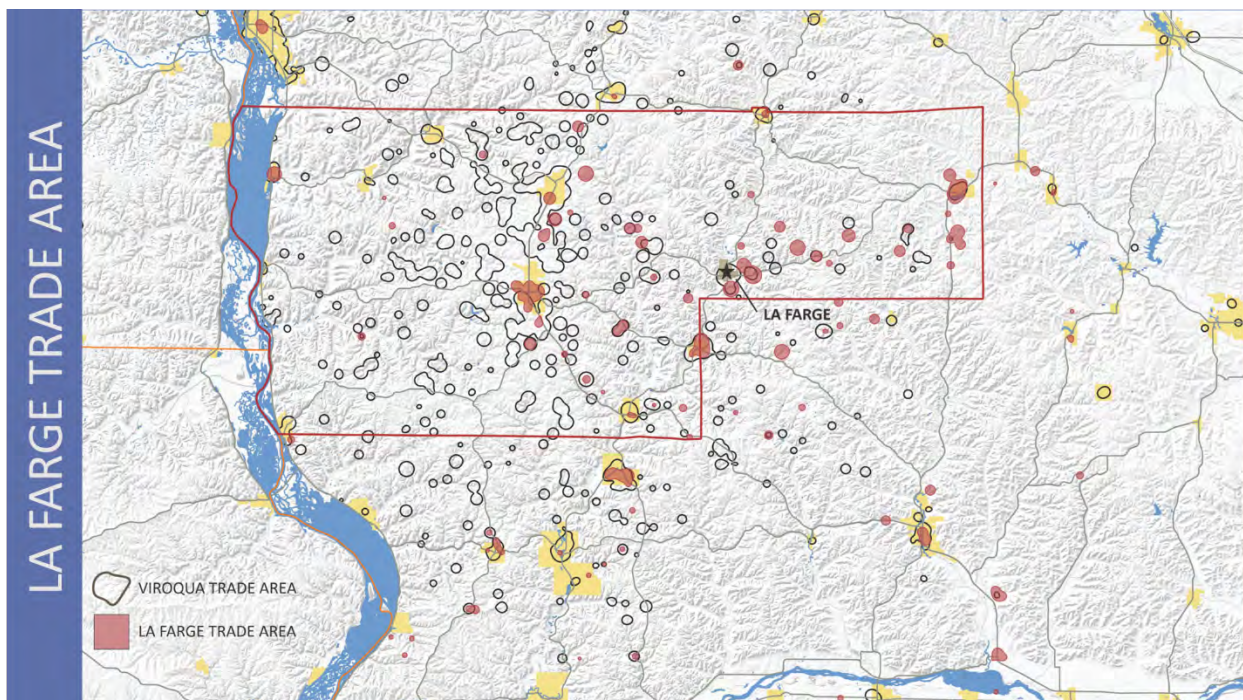
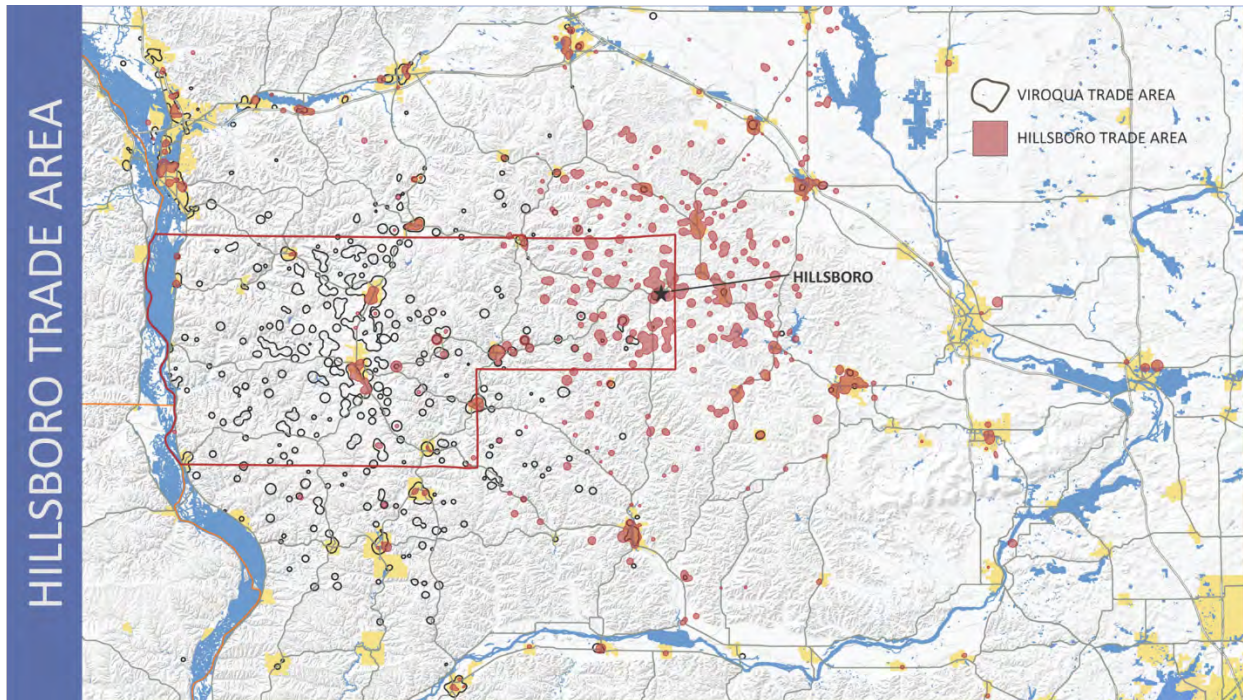
The city's trade area is generally defined by Mauston, Reedsburg, Richland Center, Viroqua, Sparta, and Tomah, though some core visitors travel further. This area includes or is near significant tourist destinations, raising the potential to attract tourist traffic to specialty retail or dining businesses that may locate in the city.





**Village of La Farge.** The area around La Farge is largely agricultural with significant tracts of conservation land, so that there is a small nearby population base. Those residents include a significant number of Amish or Mennonite households that do not have typical spending patterns, further

limiting the potential for some types of businesses. Offsetting this are the presence of Organic Valley and the tourist traffic generated by the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, Wildcat Mountain State Park, and scenic touring on Highway 131, along with other activities.

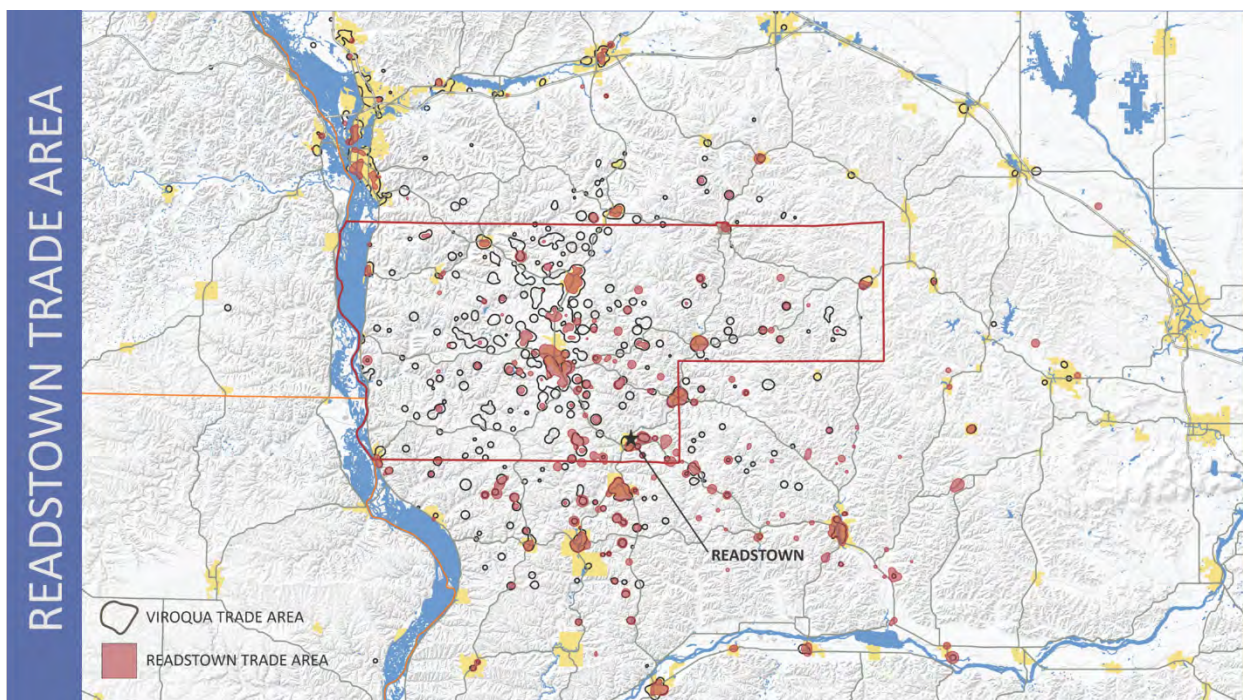
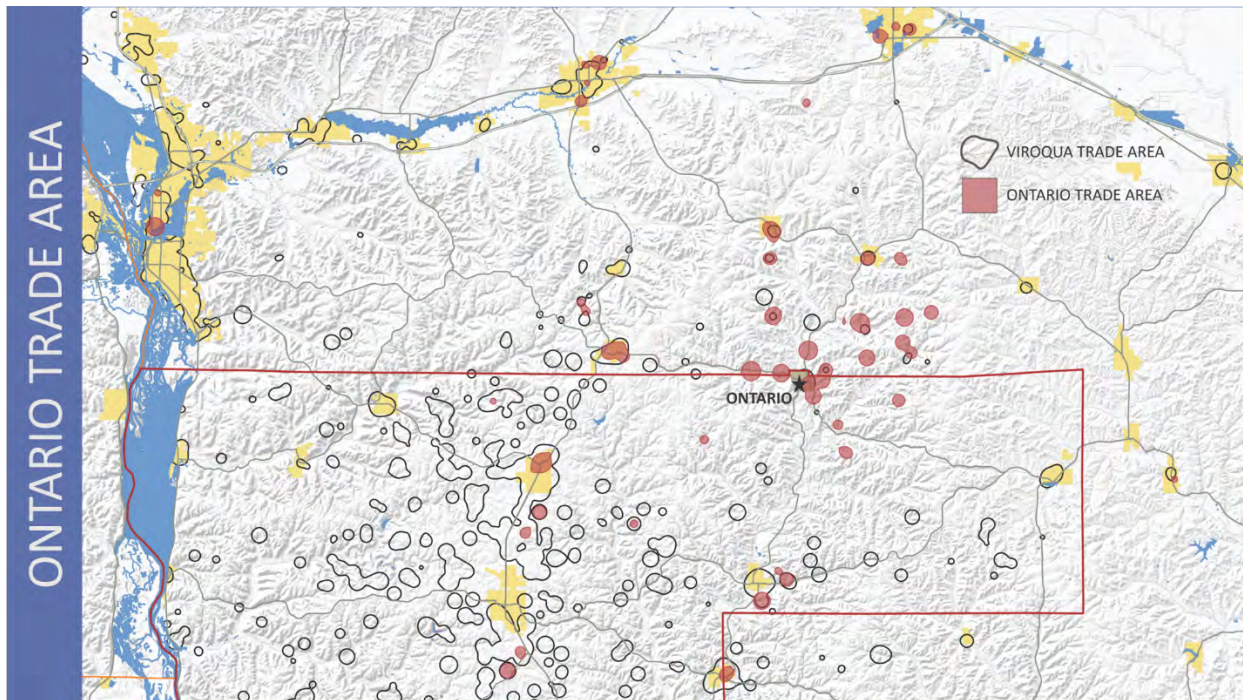




**Village of Ontario.** Ontario is the gateway to Wildcat Mountain State Park and has livery services for canoeing the Kickapoo River. There are a handful of taverns or restaurants, and a small gas station that might serve tourists to these attractions, but little else. As

with La Farge, the sparse population and large contingent of Amish and Mennonite households impacts the local market.

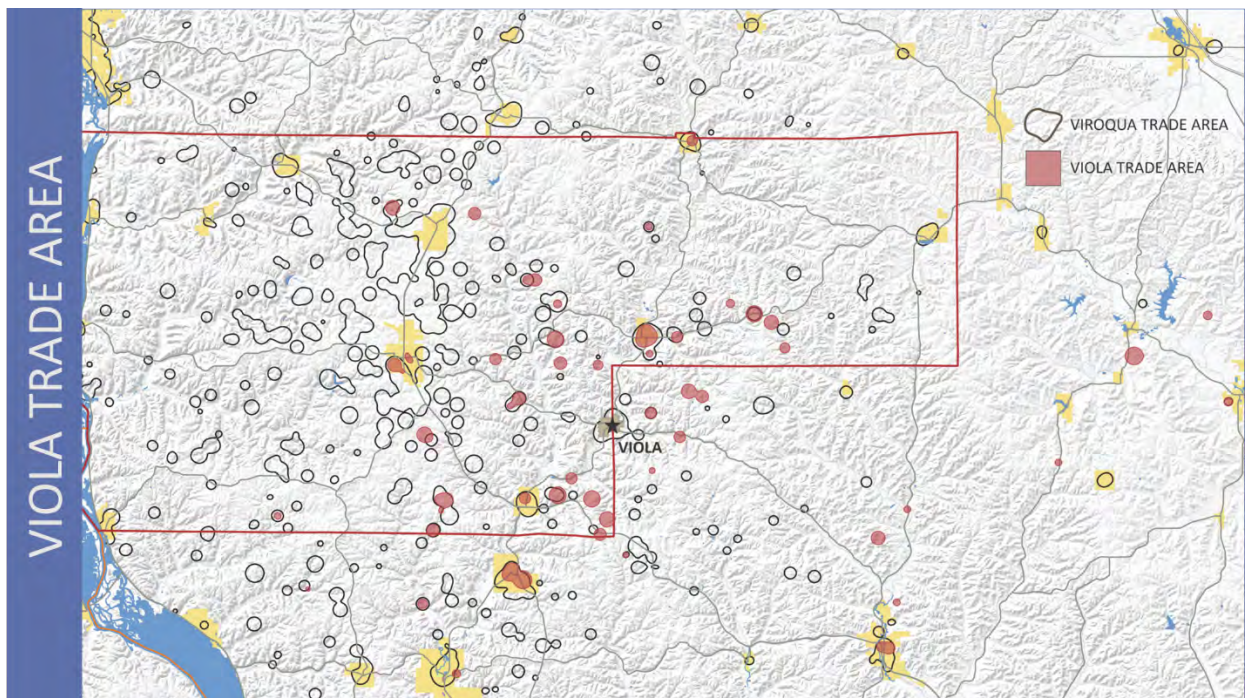
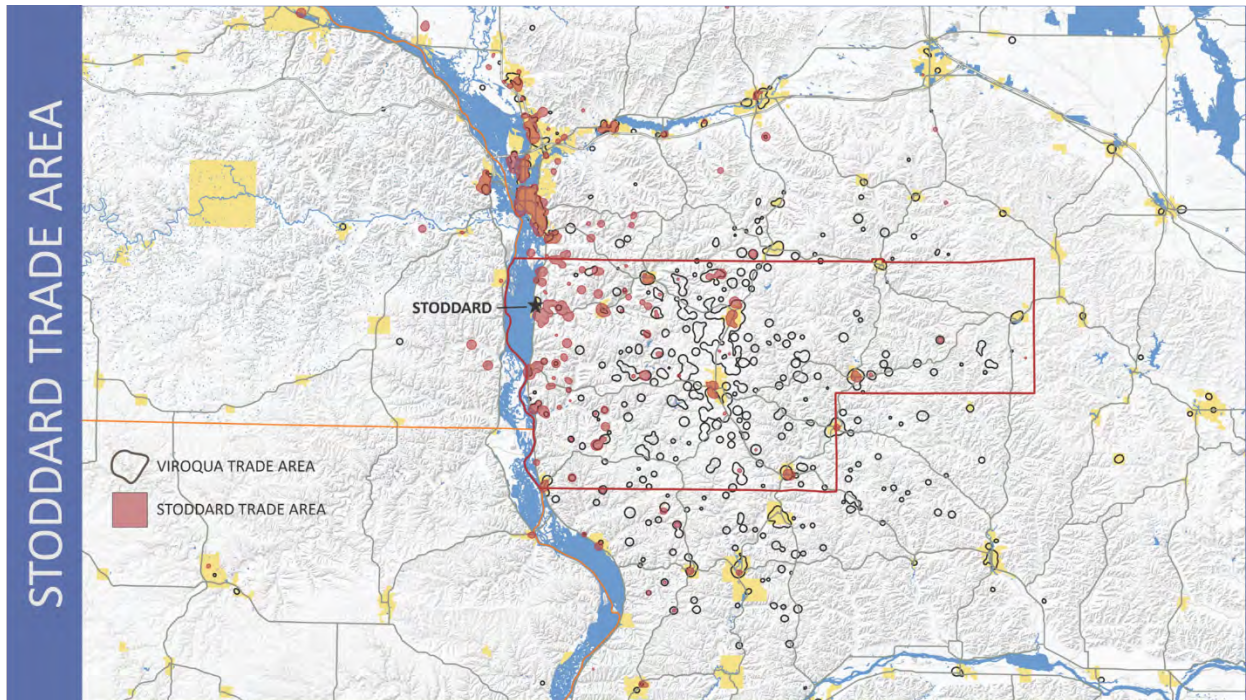
**Village of Readstown.** Though it has few commercial businesses, Readstown is able to draw customers from a good distance





because of its location on U.S. Highway 14, at the intersections of U.S. Highway 61 and State Highway 131. Readstown has a gas station and a small number of eateries, as well as Crazy Frank's and other specialty shops able to attract visitors from outside of the area.

**Village of Stoddard.** Stoddard has a trade area pattern similar to that of Genoa. State Highways 35 and 162 carry traffic through the village, and this through traffic accounts for most of the visits. Aside from a Kwik Trip and a couple taverns, there are very few businesses in the city.





**Village of Viola.** Viola is one of the county’s smallest communities, with few businesses. A bar, food co-op, bank, and gas station are located at the intersection of State Highways 131 and 56. Along with La Farge and Ontario, the Viola area is lightly-settled and contains a significant number of Amish and Mennonite households. The Kickapoo River does flow through Viola, but the village is further from the significant tourist destinations to the north.

**City of Viroqua.** Viroqua is the county seat and largest of Vernon County’s communities. It has been described extensively earlier in the analysis. The city is home to a hospital and has a large number of related health care services. County offices are located downtown and have attracted businesses such as title companies and attorneys.

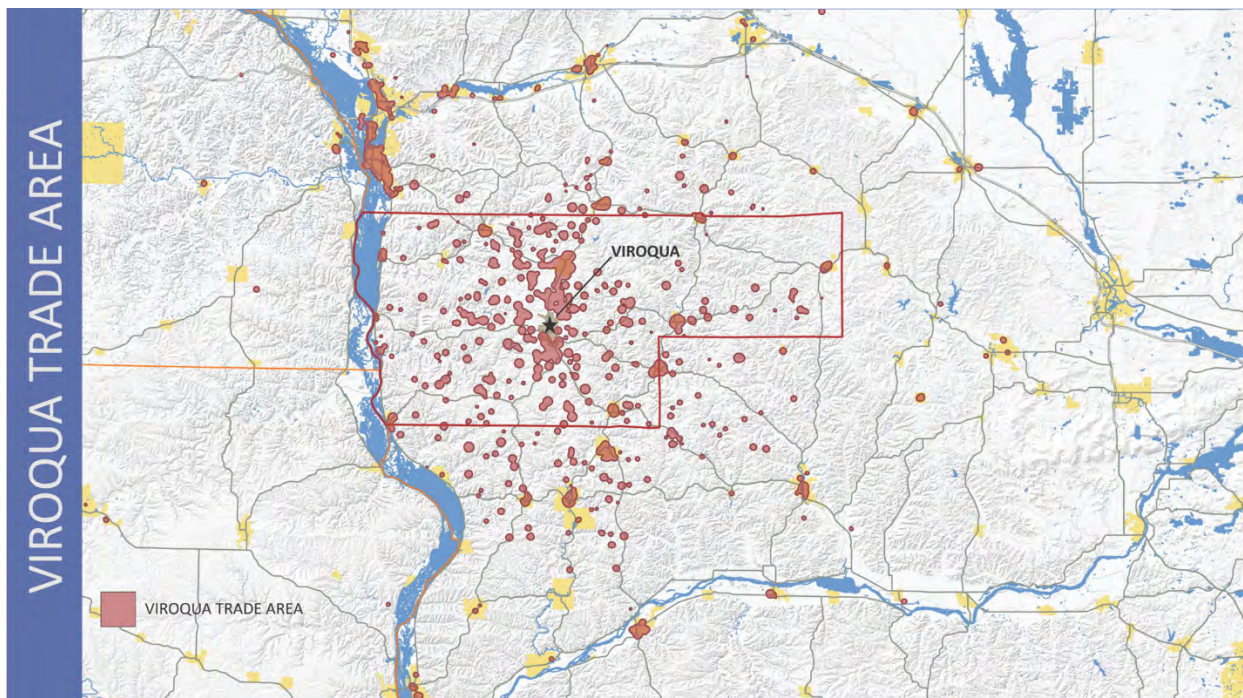
Along with having the most chain stores of any of the county’s communities, there are several unique businesses in the downtown area that attract tourists as well as local residents. These include Driftless Angler, Ewetopia Fiber Shop, Bad Axe Music,

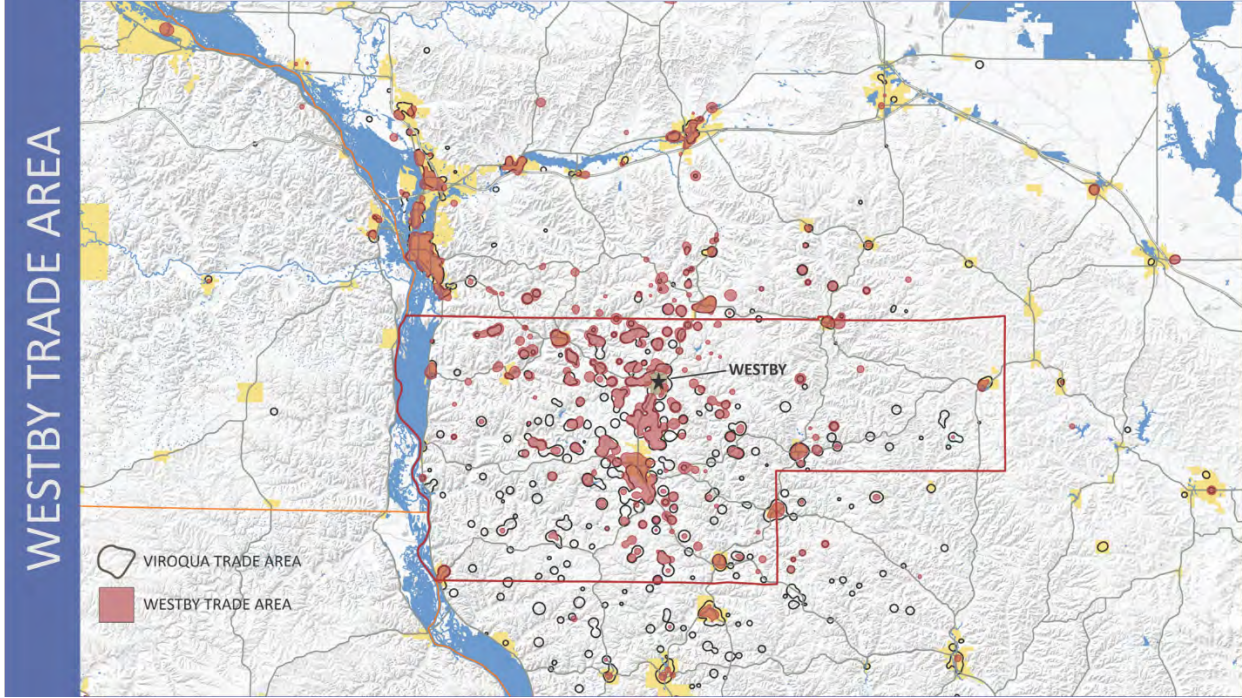
Bluedog Cycles, Viroqua Public Market, The Driftless Café, Magpie Gelato, Wonderstate Coffee, and Cakery & Bake Shop.

**City of Westby.** Westby has advantages as a commercial center in that it is close to Viroqua (with a larger population base) and it is located at an important crossroads, where U.S. Highway 14 and State Highway 27 come together. It has the second-largest concentration of commercial businesses, though these serve a mostly local population, with fewer tourist-oriented businesses.

**Amish and Mennonite business area.** As noted in the tourism analysis, there is a concentration of Amish and Mennonite shops, including fruit and vegetable stands, greenhouses, bulk goods stores, bakeries, woodworking shops, and similar businesses in an area between the Kickapoo River and Westby, from La Farge north to Cashton. Many are small shops or simple stands, and have limited hours.

These businesses do serve a local market including households within the Amish and





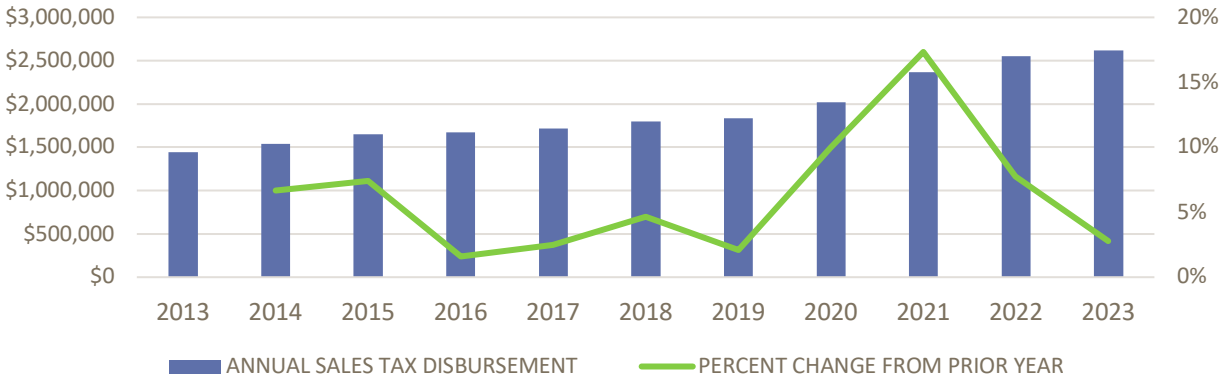
Mennonite communities as well as the general population. They also have significant tourism potential, however, there is a general lack of awareness due to limited marketing, and along with the limited hours, it is not always clear how to reach businesses such as woodworking shops. In other places with similar concentrations of Amish and Mennonite households, there are businesses that have aggregated product from several households into a single large shop.

### Commercial sales trends

Some retail goods and services sold in Wisconsin are subject to state and county sales taxes. This tax does not apply to all sales (food and drugs are exempt, for example) so tax collections cannot be used to generate an estimate of total retail sales. The amount collected can still be used to chart an overall trend in sales.

Annual sales taxes returned to the county have increased in each of the past ten years, at a

VERNON COUNTY SALES TAX COLLECTIONS





pace generally equal to, or greater than the annual rate of inflation. It is most interesting to note the significant increases from 2020 through 2022, with a 17.3 percent increase in 2021. The pandemic beginning in 2020 helps to explain these significant increases in two ways. The first is that most people chose to remain closer to home and would have done more of their shopping locally. The second is that outdoor recreational tourism and extended stays at vacation homes or rentals would have resulted in additional expenditures. It is not clear whether the county will continue to capture this elevated level of spending. Data for 2022 suggests that it may be declining, but inflation in 2023 may mask any losses.

## Commercial opportunities

Several opportunities exist for commercial development in Vernon County's communities. The County may serve any of several roles in helping to capture this potential, such as:

- Informing local communities of market opportunities or grant availability and prompting them to act.
- Coordinate and provide technical resources for local communities, as these resources do not exist within the communities, and may not be affordable individually, but may be as a shared resource.
- Developing tourism assets and promoting tourism to expand the market of potential customers.
- Addressing commercial development for small communities through comprehensive planning, ensuring that appropriate sites and infrastructure are available.

Almost all of Vernon County's communities can support some level of commercial development.

**Downtown business districts.** Several of the county's communities have a traditional downtown business district, even if it is little more than a block in length. These are still important as nodes where customers or visitors can stop and find an assortment of businesses in a walkable area. Preserving and enhancing their viability should be a priority.

Public actions typically revolve around infrastructure investments such as infrastructure, pedestrian improvements, a greenspaces or other public spaces that can host events or provide outdoor seating for restaurants. Tourism development might include installing informational kiosks at key sites, informing visitors of the services in nearby communities. Planned trails may pass through small communities and should be designed to connect through the business district.

**Tourism and touring loop.** Tourism has the greatest potential to expand the market for dining and specialty retail businesses. The Kickapoo River Valley and Mississippi River corridor currently have the strongest tourism recognition, and nearby communities can attract these visitors with businesses that meet their needs. In many cases, existing businesses could have a greater appeal by adjusting what they currently offer, to better meet the desires of visitors.

**Lodging.** Vernon County has few traditional hotels and may not have the demand to support chain hotel development. Lodging is still needed for both business travelers and for a growing number of leisure travelers. Options that might be investigated include campgrounds and RV parks (some of which might be on County or local government

sites), short-term rentals, and unique products such as lodges, farm stays, or glamping sites.

**Medical and health care services.** Viroqua and Hillsboro are the health care centers for Viroqua County and parts of surrounding counties. These services are critical to residents and important drivers of commercial vitality. The County and both city governments should maintain close relationships with the hospitals and give thought to planning where and how health care uses should be encouraged to locate in the community.

**Amish and Mennonite business area.** The cluster of Amish and Mennonite businesses

west of Highway 131 can be a significant tourist draw, and the County should look to similar areas, such as those in Indiana or Ohio, as case studies. The area especially lacks stores that aggregate furniture and other hand-made products that are in high demand from a market that could extend from Chicago to Minneapolis.

**Targeted marketing.** The information on community trade areas in this analysis should be used to more effectively target marketing, both to reach existing customers, and to explore untapped areas from which customers might be drawn.



## APPENDIX E: WORKFORCE ANALYSIS

As demand for workers grows, employers are competing to attract workers, and especially those with advanced skills. This trend is impacting the county, the region, Wisconsin, and the country as a whole, and is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Many factors are causing workforce shortages, including Baby Boomers exiting the workforce, changes in working patterns resulting from the pandemic, and fewer workers acquiring the skills or choosing to enter into high-demand occupations.

Competition for labor has resulted in wage and benefit increases, signing bonuses, and other incentives to attract workers, but childcare and housing affordability continue to be major barriers to attracting and retaining an adequate workforce. Interviews with local employers cite the lack of available starter homes as a specific challenge for entry-level workers such as school teachers. With few homes on the market, these workers are more likely to find housing outside the county and commute to work, making them less tied to the community.

**Workforce.** As was noted in the demographic analysis, Vernon County’s population is growing, and the share of school age population (5 to 17) is higher than the regional and statewide averages. Still, the current labor force population of 15,166 is down 3.9 percent over the past five years, as more workers have retired than have entered the workforce. Looking to the future, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development identifies the following primary solutions to addressing labor shortages:

- Offshoring production
- Immigration
- Mitigating barriers to employment for the chronically unemployed, and
- Technological advancement

Attracting more workers to the county (immigration) and technological advancement are the most likely strategies for Vernon County, given the lack of large industry prone to offshoring and the low unemployment rate.

**Employment by Industry.** According to Wisconsin Department of Workforce

VERNON COUNTY POPULATION BY AGE

	VERNON	MONROE	JUNEAU	SAUK	RICHLAND	CRAWFORD	REGION	WISCONSIN
Preschool (0 to 4)	7%	6%	5%	6%	5%	5%	5%	10%
School age (5 to 17)	19%	19%	15%	17%	16%	15%	17%	16%
College age (18 to 24)	7%	7%	6%	7%	7%	7%	6%	10%
Young adult (25 to 44)	20%	24%	23%	25%	20%	21%	19%	25%
Older adult (45 to 64)	26%	26%	29%	26%	28%	28%	23%	26%
Senior (65 and older)	20%	17%	21%	19%	24%	24%	21%	18%
Median age	41.3	39.7	45.7	41.1	46.5	47.2	43.6	39.9



Development, the industry sectors employing the most people in Vernon County are education and health services (2,577); trade, transportation, and utilities (1,846); and manufacturing. Together, these three sectors account for 62 percent of all employment in the county.

Over the past year the sectors with the largest percent increase in employment included trade, transportation, and utilities; construction; other services, and information. Over the past five years the sectors with the largest increase in employment included

statewide average of 3.6 percent in October of 2023. The unemployment rate for Vernon County was 2.6 percent, the lowest in the six-county comparison region. Crawford County had the highest unemployment rate at just 3.2 percent, followed by Juneau and Crawford counties (2.9 percent), Monroe County (2.7 percent), and Sauk County (2.6 percent).

**Employment Projections.** The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development develops employment projections for eleven workforce development areas around the state. Vernon County is part of the western

#### WORKFORCE PROJECTIONS

	2020 Employment	Projected 2030 Employment	Employment Change	Percent Change (2020 to 2030)
Total all industries	154,728	164,757	10,029	7%
Natural resources and mining	5,842	5,774	-68	-1%
Construction	4,941	5,409	468	10%
Manufacturing	21,541	22,558	1,017	5%
Trade, transportation, utilities	29,226	31,312	2,086	7%
Information	1,112	1,304	192	17%
Financial activities	6,097	6,923	826	14%
Professional/business services	8,806	9,373	567	6%
Education and health services	36,241	37,675	1,434	4%
Leisure and hospitality	11,215	13,126	1,911	17%
Other services (except government)	6,558	7,749	1,191	18%
Public administration	12,538	13,395	857	7%
Self-employed and family workers	10,611	10,159	-452	-4%

manufacturing, construction, financial activities, natural resources and mining, and other services. Manufacturing, construction, financial activities, other services, and information were the only sectors in which employment grew in both the past one-year and past five-year period. Construction (29 percent) and manufacturing (41 percent) together accounted for over two-thirds (70 percent) of employment growth between 2017 to 2022.

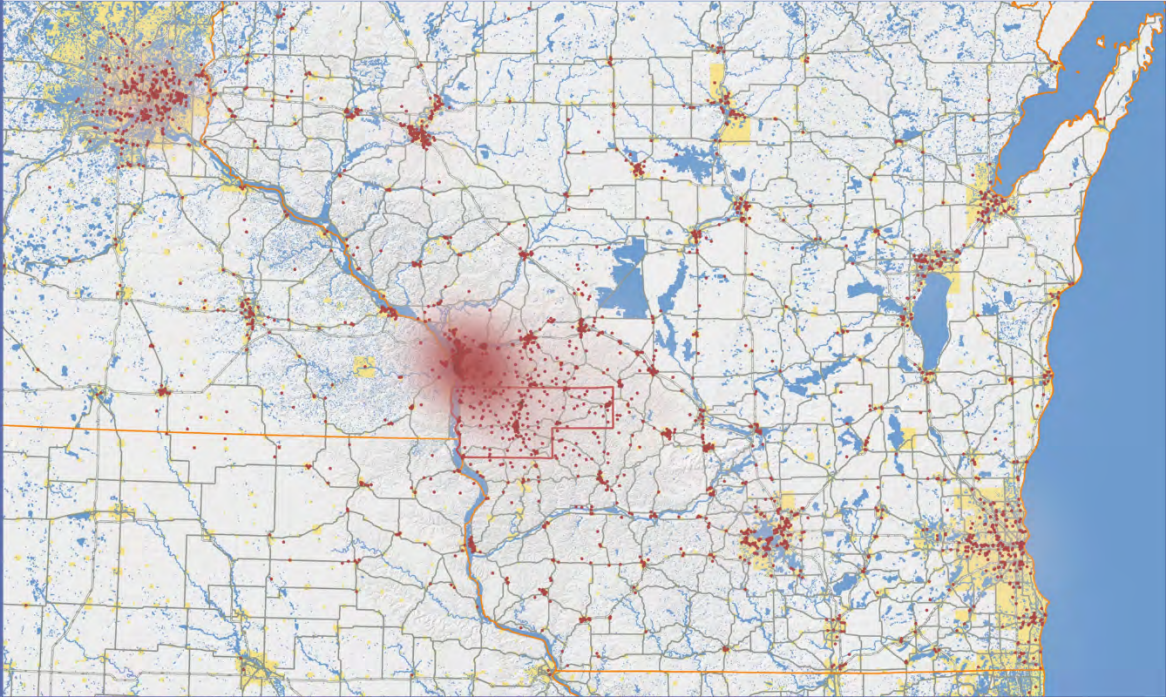
**Unemployment.** The unemployment rate in Vernon County and the region was below the

workforce development area, along with Buffalo, Crawford, Juneau, La Crosse, Monroe, and Trempealeau counties.

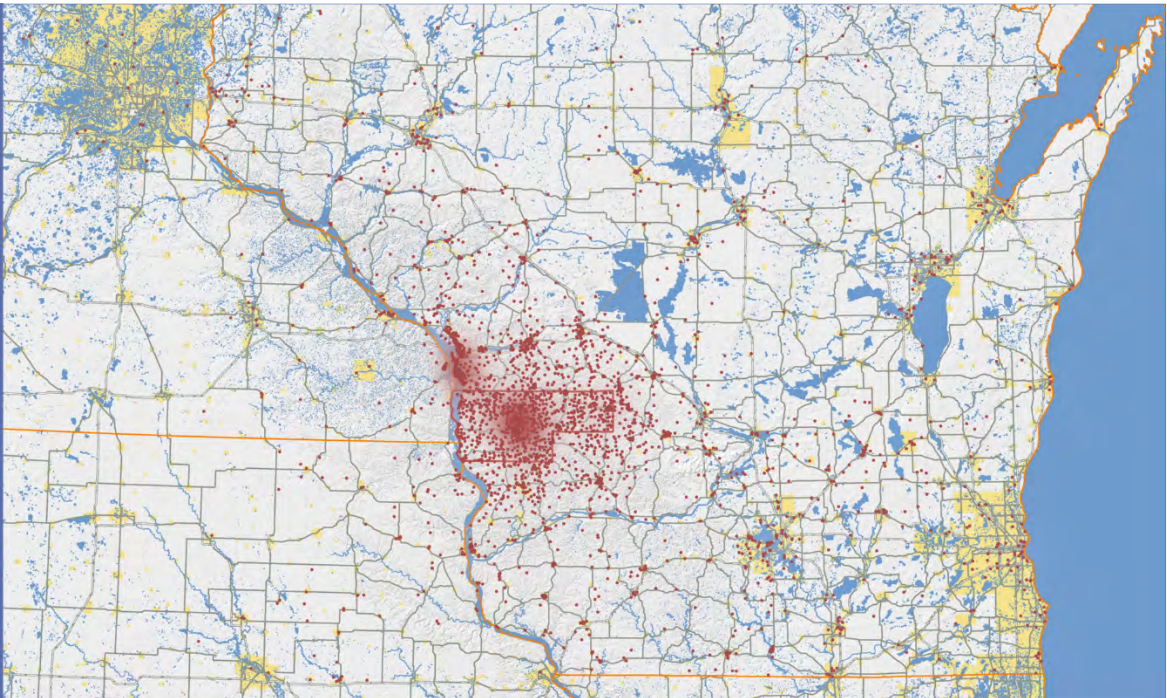
Regional employment is anticipated to grow 6.5 percent from 2020 to 2030, increasing by 10,029 jobs. The largest employment growth is expected in service industries such as leisure and hospitality, other services, and information. Both manufacturing and construction employment are also projected to grow over the period, at 9.5 percent and 4.7 percent, respectively. It should be noted that these projections were prepared prior to



## RESIDENTS' WORKPLACES



## WORKFORCE ORIGINS

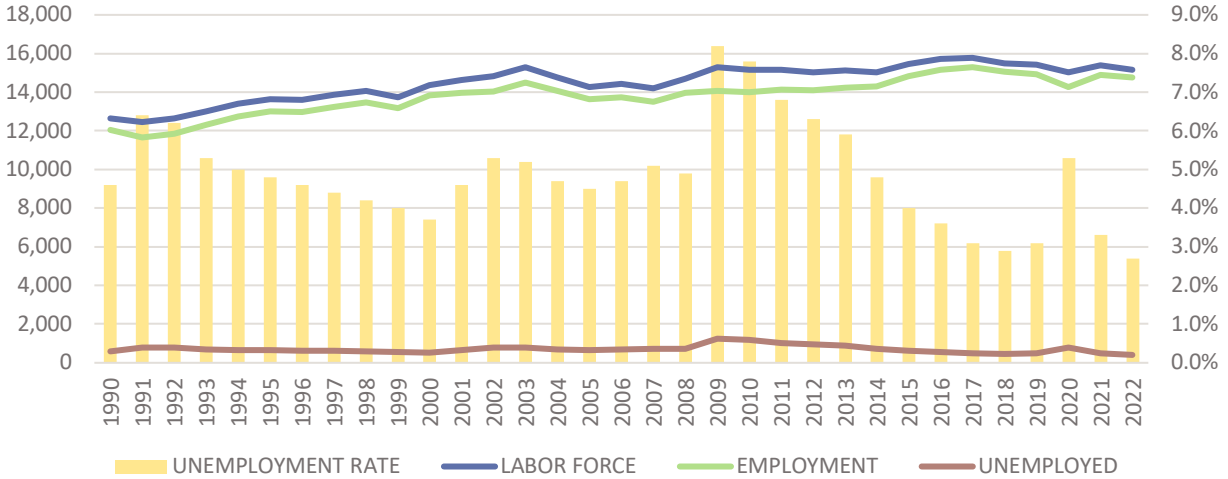


the pandemic, which has caused significant employment impacts in industries such as services and construction.

**Worker Flow.** Vernon County draws a significant portion of its workforce from neighboring counties, with the majority of

workers commuting in from La Crosse and Monroe Counties. Over the five-year period from 2016 to 2021 (the latest available data), the average commute distance increased, with more workers driving longer distances to Vernon County for employment than in prior years.

### LABOR FORCE AND UNEMPLOYMENT



An estimated 3,653 workers are employed in Vernon County who live outside the county. Another 4,434 workers both live and work in the county, and 8,891 workers living in Vernon County work elsewhere. A quarter of the county’s working residents (25.5 percent) commute more than 50 miles to work, although the data does not specify how often during the week these workers are commuting. It is likely that some portion more routinely work from home while occasionally commuting to their formal workplace.

The number of county residents working outside of the county has grown over time. Along with the mapping of worker locations, this may be an indicator of Vernon County’s

attractiveness as a place to live, for those who are able to work remotely. Quantifying and tracking the numbers of remote workers is complicated by definitional issues as increasingly many workers are working from home one, two, or three days a week.

Compared to where residents work, the map showing locations from which Vernon County draws its workforce is far more compact. The county does not offer a large number of the kinds of jobs for which workers might typically be willing to commute longer distances. Building more housing and providing additional day care options are still considered priorities to lure more workers to live in the County.

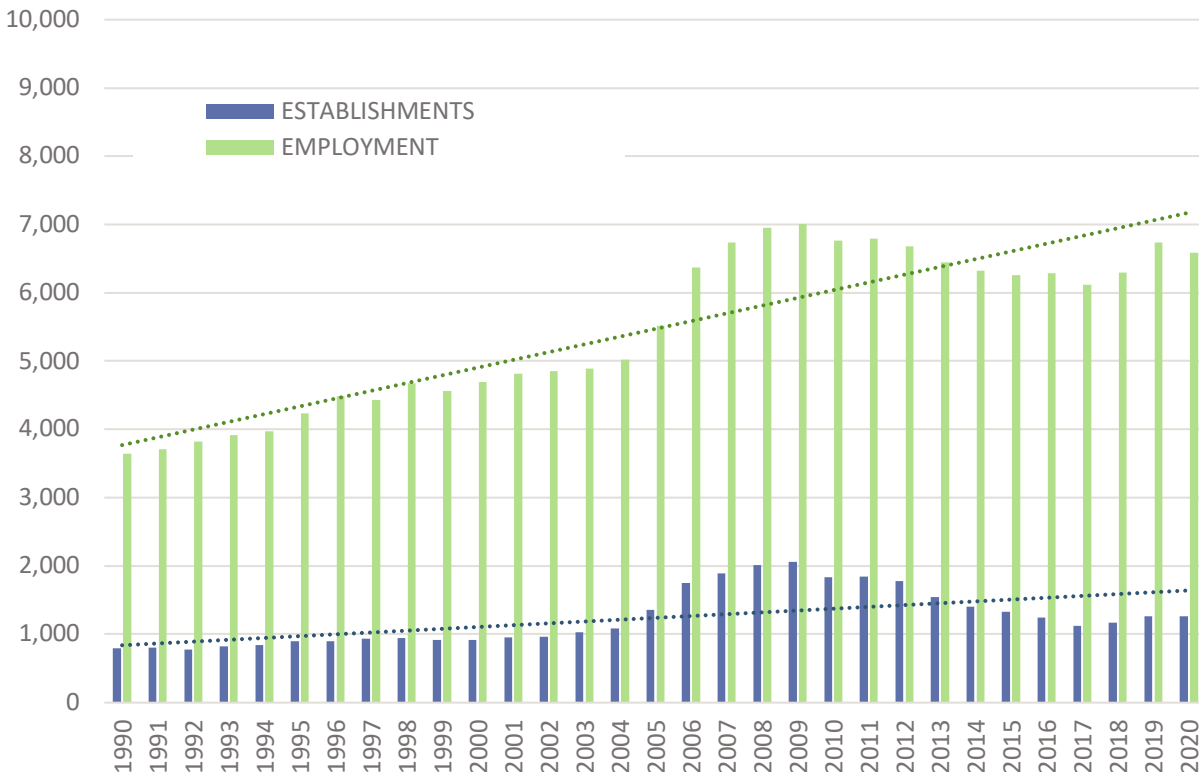
## APPENDIX F: INDUSTRY ANALYSIS

Between 1990 and 2020, the number of business establishments in Vernon County increased from 856 to 1,387. Employment grew from 5,273 to 9,254 in the same period. These figures are derived from the National Employment Time Series (NETS) database, based on Dun & Bradstreet credit reporting data, and include pass-through entities. The data is collected at the establishment level, so that businesses with multiple locations will have multiple entries with relevant information specific to that location (establishment). Employment totals include persons employed within their own business, including solo, or one-person businesses.

While there has been overall growth in establishments and employment over the past three decades, some trends need to be noted.

- The number of establishments in the county grew at a slow, but steady pace until 2005, before rapidly increasing and reaching a peak in 2009. The county lost establishments over the next several years before the numbers slowly started to increase, beginning in 2018.
- The trend for employment shows steady growth from 1990 to 2005, before a significant jump in 2006, followed by continued growth into 2009. Since that time the number of jobs has fluctuated, but remained at roughly the same level.
- Establishment size trended larger, based on the number of employees

ESTABLISHMENTS AND EMPLOYMENT





per establishment. This started at 6.16, and in 2020 stood at 6.67 employees per establishment. This change runs counter to most places, where smaller establishments are more typical.

- Data from this source only extends to the beginning of 2020. The COVID pandemic began in March of 2020, causing many layoffs and business closures across the country. Data from both the Bureau of the Census' Business Patterns (though 2021) and the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (Local Area Unemployment Statistics) suggest that most pandemic-related unemployment in Vernon County was short-term, and business losses were light, compared to urban places.

There are multiple advantages to using the NETS database, as it enables a far more complete analysis of change, compared to government sources.

There are some issues, common to government databases as well, which can cause some errors. Notably, over time, more establishments will be added that existed earlier, but had not been reporting. This can distort actual industry growth. Also, self-reporting of data tends to cause errors in the industry listed, and total employment. The latter issue is most common in government, education, and religious organizations, while the first tends to distort "other" industries in services and manufacturing.

## Leading industries

Vernon County had 24 industries with at least ten establishments in 1990, led by dairy cattle and milk production. The 430 establishments in these industries made up just over half (50.5 percent) of the county's total, and 44.6

percent of its employment. Over the course of 30 years, two-thirds (16) of these industries saw a decline in the number of establishments, and 11 lost employment. In 2020, they accounted for 29.4 percent of establishments and 28.8 percent of employment.

Twenty-six industries had ten or more establishments in Vernon County in 2020, including 14 from the 1990 list. Dairy cattle and milk production fell to third, behind all other support services and all other miscellaneous crop farming. The 630 establishments in these industries make up 45.7 percent of the county total, and 34.2 percent of its employment.

Overall, there has been some level of diversification in the county's economy. The North American Industrial Classification System (NAICS) recognizes 1,058 individual industries across 20 industry sectors. In 1990, there were 226 industries represented in Vernon County. By 2020, that number had climbed to 305.

There have been few industries with a significant increase in the number of establishments in recent years, with only two having a gain of more than ten. Five industries lost more than ten establishments. Many of those with losses are experiencing industry-wide contraction.

A greater number of industries saw a significant gain (26) or loss (23) in employment, interpreted as a change of at least 15 employees within the industry. Industries related to agriculture, government, health care, and services tended to be among those gaining, while many related to agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and services tended to be among those losing employment.

LARGEST INDUSTRIES BY ESTABLISHMENTS IN 1990 (10 OR MORE ESTABLISHMENTS)

NAICS	INDUSTRY DESCRIPTION	Establishments			Employment		
		1990	2020	CHANGE	1990	2020	CHANGE
112120	Dairy Cattle and Milk Production	60	44	-16	134	154	20
524210	Insurance Agencies and Brokerages	31	15	-16	84	39	-45
611110	Elementary and Secondary Schools	26	30	4	1041	1201	160
812112	Beauty Salons	24	22	-2	55	45	-10
111150	Corn Farming	23	8	-15	48	15	-33
111998	All Other Miscellaneous Crop Farming	22	64	42	54	92	38
238210	Electrical Contractors and Other Wiring Installation Contractors	22	25	3	50	62	12
813110	Religious Organizations	22	15	-7	43	83	40
236115	New Single-Family Housing Construction (except For-Sale Builders)	17	28	11	42	90	48
238220	Plumbing, Heating, and Air-Conditioning Contractors	17	15	-2	36	32	-4
722511	Full-Service Restaurants	17	8	-9	291	231	-60
811310	Commercial and Industrial Machinery and Equipment (except Automotive and Electronic) Repair and Maintenance	14	7	-7	39	10	-29
451110	Sporting Goods Stores	13	8	-5	31	22	-9
722410	Drinking Places (Alcoholic Beverages)	13	8	-5	37	47	10
624410	Child Day Care Services	12	16	4	16	70	54
811111	General Automotive Repair	12	11	-1	25	36	11
111199	All Other Grain Farming	11	15	4	23	7	-16
238910	Site Preparation Contractors	11	15	4	19	33	14
423820	Farm and Garden Machinery and Equipment Merchant Wholesalers	11	13	2	69	63	-6
541110	Offices of Lawyers	11	7	-4	40	35	-5
541940	Veterinary Services	11	7	-4	35	70	35
441120	Used Car Dealers	10	9	-1	41	13	-28
445120	Convenience Stores	10	9	-1	58	161	103
621210	Offices of Dentists	10	7	-3	30	38	8
TOTAL – INDUSTRIES WITH 10+ ESTABLISHMENTS		430	406	-24	2341	2649	308
TOTAL – ALL INDUSTRIES IN VERNON COUNTY		852	1,379		5,251	9,187	
PERCENT OF VERNON COUNTY TOTAL		50.5%	29.4%		44.6%	28.8%	

LARGEST INDUSTRIES BY ESTABLISHMENTS IN 2020 (10 OR MORE ESTABLISHMENTS)

NAICS	INDUSTRY DESCRIPTION	Establishments			Employment		
		1990	2020	CHANGE	1990	2020	CHANGE
561990	All Other Support Services	5	131	126	9	200	191
111998	All Other Miscellaneous Crop Farming	22	64	42	54	92	38
112120	Dairy Cattle and Milk Production	60	44	-16	134	154	20
561499	All Other Business Support Services	0	40	40	0	77	77
611110	Elementary and Secondary Schools	26	30	4	1041	1201	160
236115	New Single-Family Housing Construction (except For-Sale Builders)	17	28	11	42	90	48
813110	Religious Organizations	22	25	3	43	83	40
812112	Beauty Salons	24	22	-2	55	45	-10
721110	Hotels (except Casino Hotels) and Motels	3	17	14	7	95	88
811111	General Automotive Repair	12	16	4	25	36	11
453998	All Other Miscellaneous Store Retailers (except Tobacco Stores)	8	16	8	30	76	46
621111	Offices of Physicians (except Mental Health Specialists)	8	16	8	87	101	14
524210	Insurance Agencies and Brokerages	31	15	-16	84	39	-45
238210	Electrical Contractors and Other Wiring Installation Contractors	22	15	-7	50	62	12
722511	Full-Service Restaurants	17	15	-2	291	231	-60
238910	Site Preparation Contractors	11	15	4	19	33	14
541940	Veterinary Services	11	15	4	35	70	35
531210	Offices of Real Estate Agents and Brokers	7	15	8	24	57	33
484110	General Freight Trucking, Local	5	15	10	9	35	26
541110	Offices of Lawyers	11	13	2	40	35	-5
621399	Offices of All Other Miscellaneous Health Practitioners	0	12	12	0	40	40
624410	Child Day Care Services	12	11	-1	16	70	54
811121	Automotive Body, Paint, and Interior Repair and Maintenance	9	10	1	24	12	-12
621310	Offices of Chiropractors	7	10	3	14	35	21
921110	Executive Offices	6	10	4	332	90	-242
491110	Postal Service	1	10	9	9	80	71
TOTAL – INDUSTRIES WITH 10+ ESTABLISHMENTS		357	630	273	2474	3139	665
TOTAL – ALL INDUSTRIES IN VERNON COUNTY		852	1,379		5,251	9,187	
PERCENT OF VERNON COUNTY TOTAL		41.9%	45.7%		47.1%	34.2%	

LARGEST INDUSTRIES BY EMPLOYMENT IN 1990 (40 OR MORE EMPLOYEES)

NAICS	INDUSTRY DESCRIPTION	Establishments			Employment		
		1990	2020	CHANGE	1990	2020	CHANGE
611110	Elementary and Secondary Schools	26	30	4	1041	1201	160
921110	Executive Offices	6	10	4	332	90	-242
722511	Full-Service Restaurants	17	15	-2	291	231	-60
622110	General Medical and Surgical Hospitals	2	2	0	209	225	16
621112	Offices of Physicians, Mental Health Specialists	2	3	1	184	328	144
517311	Wired Telecommunications Carriers	2	3	1	149	154	5
112120	Dairy Cattle and Milk Production	60	44	-16	134	154	20
445110	Supermarkets and Other Grocery (except Convenience) Stores	9	8	-1	119	173	54
424320	Men's and Boys' Clothing and Furnishings Merchant Wholesalers	2	1	-1	102	1	-102
623110	Nursing Care Facilities (Skilled Nursing Facilities)	1	3	2	100	272	172
621111	Offices of Physicians (except Mental Health Specialists)	8	16	8	87	101	14
524210	Insurance Agencies and Brokerages	31	15	-16	84	39	-45
321911	Wood Window and Door Manufacturing	1	2	1	80	14	-66
561311	Employment Placement Agencies	1	0	-1	80	0	-80
423820	Farm and Garden Machinery and Equipment Merchant Wholesalers	11	7	-4	69	63	-6
622310	Specialty (except Psychiatric and Substance Abuse) Hospitals	2	3	1	64	252	188
311513	Cheese Manufacturing	2	1	-1	64	95	31
445120	Convenience Stores	10	9	-1	58	161	103
812112	Beauty Salons	24	22	2	55	45	-10
111998	All Other Miscellaneous Crop Farming	22	64	40	54	92	38
238210	Electrical Contractors and Other Wiring Installation Contractors	22	15	-7	50	62	12
111150	Corn Farming	23	8	-15	48	15	-33
813110	Religious Organizations	22	25	3	43	83	40
236115	New Single-Family Housing Construction (except For-Sale Builders)	17	28	11	42	90	48
441120	Used Car Dealers	10	7	-3	41	13	-28
922160	Fire Protection	2	6	4	41	106	65
541110	Offices of Lawyers	11	13	2	40	35	5
813319	Other Social Advocacy Organizations	1	4	3	40	44	4
TOTAL – INDUSTRIES WITH 10+ ESTABLISHMENTS		347	364	-17	3,701	4,139	-438
TOTAL – ALL INDUSTRIES IN VERNON COUNTY		852	1,379		5,251	9,187	
PERCENT OF VERNON COUNTY TOTAL		40.73%	26.40%		70.48%	45.05%	

LARGEST IN INDUSTRIES BY EMPLOYMENT IN 2020 (40 OR MORE EMPLOYEES)

NAICS	INDUSTRY DESCRIPTION	Establishments			Employment		
		1990	2020	CHANGE	1990	2020	CHANGE
611110	Elementary and Secondary Schools	26	30	4	1041	1201	160
311411	Frozen Fruit, Juice, and Vegetable Manufacturing	1	1	0	12	342	230
621112	Offices of Physicians, Mental Health Specialists	2	3	-1	184	328	144
623110	Nursing Care Facilities (Skilled Nursing Facilities)	1	3	-2	100	272	172
336991	Motorcycle, Bicycle, and Parts Manufacturing	0	2	-2	0	261	261
622310	Specialty (except Psychiatric and Substance Abuse) Hospitals	2	3	1	64	252	188
722511	Full-Service Restaurants	17	15	-2	291	231	-60
622110	General Medical and Surgical Hospitals	2	2	0	209	225	16
452210	Department Stores	1	2	1	2	203	201
561990	All Other Support Services	5	131	126	9	200	191
445110	Supermarkets and Other Grocery (except Convenience) Stores	9	8	-1	119	173	54
445120	Convenience Stores	10	9	-1	58	161	103
517311	Wired Telecommunications Carriers	2	3	1	149	154	5
112120	Dairy Cattle and Milk Production	60	44	-16	134	154	20
445230	Fruit and Vegetable Markets	0	2	2	0	121	121
722513	Limited-Service Restaurants	0	5	5	0	119	119
922160	Fire Protection	2	6	4	41	106	65
621111	Offices of Physicians (except Mental Health Specialists)	8	16	8	87	101	14
311513	Cheese Manufacturing	2	1	-1	64	95	31
721110	Hotels (except Casino Hotels) and Motels	3	17	14	7	95	88
111998	All Other Miscellaneous Crop Farming	22	64	40	54	92	28
921110	Executive Offices	6	10	4	332	90	242
236115	New Single-Family Housing Construction (except For-Sale Builders)	17	28	11	42	90	48
813110	Religious Organizations	22	25	3	43	83	40
491110	Postal Service	1	10	9	9	80	71
713990	All Other Amusement and Recreation Industries	5	8	3	9	79	70
441110	New Car Dealers	2	5	3	30	78	48
561499	All Other Business Support Services	0	40	40	0	77	77
453998	All Other Miscellaneous Store Retailers (except Tobacco Stores)	8	16	8	30	76	46
541940	Veterinary Services	11	15	4	35	70	35
624410	Child Day Care Services	12	11	-1	16	70	54
111219	Other Vegetable (except Potato) and Melon Farming	1	5	4	3	66	63
921120	Legislative Bodies	0	2	2	0	66	66
485310	Taxi Service	0	5	5	0	65	65
423820	Farm and Garden Machinery and Equipment Merchant Wholesalers	11	7	4	69	63	-6



LARGEST IN INDUSTRIES BY EMPLOYMENT IN 2020 (40 OR MORE EMPLOYEES) (CONTINUED)

NAICS	INDUSTRY DESCRIPTION	Establishments			Employment		
		1990	2020	CHANGE	1990	2020	CHANGE
238210	Electrical Contractors and Other Wiring Installation Contractors	22	15	-7	50	62	12
446110	Pharmacies and Drug Stores	1	3	2	4	58	54
922110	Courts	0	2	2	0	58	58
531210	Offices of Real Estate Agents and Brokers	7	15	8	24	57	33
922120	Police Protection	0	3	3	0	57	57
921190	Other General Government Support	1	3	2	18	55	37
722515	Snack and Nonalcoholic Beverage Bars	2	4	2	19	53	34
445299	All Other Specialty Food Stores	1	6	5	4	50	46
722410	Drinking Places (Alcoholic Beverages)	13	8	-5	37	47	10
624120	Services for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities	1	3	2	2	47	45
923120	Administration of Public Health Programs	0	1	1	0	47	47
812112	Beauty Salons	24	22	-2	55	45	-10
813319	Other Social Advocacy Organizations	1	4	3	40	44	4
423730	Warm Air Heating and Air-Conditioning Equipment and Supplies Merchant Wholesalers	1	1	0	24	40	16
522110	Commercial Banking	1	7	6	2	40	38
621399	Offices of All Other Miscellaneous Health Practitioners	0	12	12	0	40	40
TOTAL – INDUSTRIES WITH 10+ ESTABLISHMENTS		148	258	110	523	1,673	1,150
TOTAL – ALL INDUSTRIES IN VERNON COUNTY		852	1,379		5,251	9,187	
PERCENT OF VERNON COUNTY TOTAL		17.37%	18.71%		9.96%	18.21%	

INDUSTRIES WITH THE GREATEST CHANGE IN ESTABLISHMENTS BETWEEN 1990 AND 2020 (FIVE OR MORE)

NAICS	INDUSTRY DESCRIPTION	ESTABLISHMENTS			EMPLOYMENT		
		1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020	1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020
561499	All Other Business Support Services	0	12	28	0	17	60
111998	All Other Miscellaneous Crop Farming	1	29	12	-10	46	2
621399	Offices of All Other Miscellaneous Health Practitioners	2	1	9	4	1	35
621111	Offices of Physicians (except Mental Health Specialists)	-3	3	8	-46	18	42
541420	Industrial Design Services	0	2	7	0	2	14
611110	Elementary and Secondary Schools	1	-3	6	-9	-8	177
541611	Administrative Management and General Management Consulting Services	0	1	5	0	3	8

722410	Drinking Places (Alcoholic Beverages)	4	-4	-5	21	1	-12
236118	Residential Remodelers	0	5	-5	-3	12	-15
443142	Electronics Stores	-1	2	-5	6	4	-17
453310	Used Merchandise Stores	7	-2	-6	11	-12	-7
238320	Painting and Wall Covering Contractors	3	2	-6	5	0	-8
112112	Cattle Feedlots	0	8	-6	0	10	-7
531210	Offices of Real Estate Agents and Brokers	7	8	-7	21	33	-21
722511	Full-Service Restaurants	3	3	-8	25	-40	-45
238220	Plumbing, Heating, and Air-Conditioning Contractors	-5	5	-9	2	13	-19
111199	All Other Grain Farming	-10	15	-9	-21	24	-19
541110	Offices of Lawyers	0	12	-10	-12	41	-34
484110	General Freight Trucking, Local	6	15	-11	12	23	-9
236115	New Single-Family Housing Construction (except For-Sale Builders)	2	22	-13	49	16	-17
112120	Dairy Cattle and Milk Production	19	8	-43	75	-36	-19
561990	All Other Support Services	8	521	-403	17	653	-479

INDUSTRIES WITH THE GREATEST CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT BETWEEN 1990 AND 2020 (15 OR MORE)

NAICS	INDUSTRY DESCRIPTION	ESTABLISHMENTS			EMPLOYMENT		
		1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020	1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020
611110	Elementary and Secondary Schools	1	-3	6	-9	-8	177
445230	Fruit and Vegetable Markets	1	-1	2	3	-3	121
921120	Legislative Bodies	0	0	2	0	0	66
623110	Nursing Care Facilities (Skilled Nursing Facilities)	3	-1	0	141	-31	62
561499	All Other Business Support Services	0	12	28	0	17	60
922110	Courts	0	0	2	0	0	58
713990	All Other Amusement and Recreation Industries	1	-2	4	31	-8	47
722513	Limited-Service Restaurants	1	2	2	12	60	47
923120	Administration of Public Health Programs	0	0	1	0	0	47
621111	Offices of Physicians (except Mental Health Specialists)	-3	3	8	-46	18	42
721110	Hotels (except Casino Hotels) and Motels	6	4	4	25	23	40
921190	Other General Government Support	0	0	2	0	0	37
111219	Other Vegetable (except Potato) and Melon Farming	1	4	-1	11	16	36
621399	Offices of All Other Miscellaneous Health Practitioners	2	1	9	4	1	35
522110	Commercial Banking	4	0	2	18	-4	24
311999	All Other Miscellaneous Food Manufacturing	0	1	1	0	5	24
238210	Electrical Contractors and Other Wiring Installation Contractors	-5	2	-4	-12	2	22
441310	Automotive Parts and Accessories Stores	1	0	3	3	1	20
541940	Veterinary Services	0	2	2	3	13	19
423820	Farm and Garden Machinery and Equipment Merchant Wholesalers	-7	1	2	-27	2	19
488510	Freight Transportation Arrangement	0	1	3	0	4	18
441110	New Car Dealers	2	-1	2	45	-15	18
921110	Executive Offices	0	1	3	-263	4	17
813319	Other Social Advocacy Organizations	0	0	3	-11	0	15
111422	Floriculture Production	0	0	3	0	0	15
722320	Caterers	0	1	1	0	1	15
712110	Museums	1	0	0	24	1	-15
721214	Recreational and Vacation Camps (except Campgrounds)	1	0	-2	2	11	-15
812990	All Other Personal Services	2	4	-3	2	19	-15
236118	Residential Remodelers	0	5	-5	-3	12	-15
522310	Mortgage and Nonmortgage Loan Brokers	0	1	-1	0	17	-17
443142	Electronics Stores	-1	2	-5	6	4	-17
236115	New Single-Family Housing Construction (except For-Sale Builders)	2	22	-13	49	16	-17
333111	Farm Machinery and Equipment Manufacturing	0	1	0	0	19	-18

INDUSTRIES WITH THE GREATEST CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT BETWEEN 1990 AND 2020 (15 OR MORE)

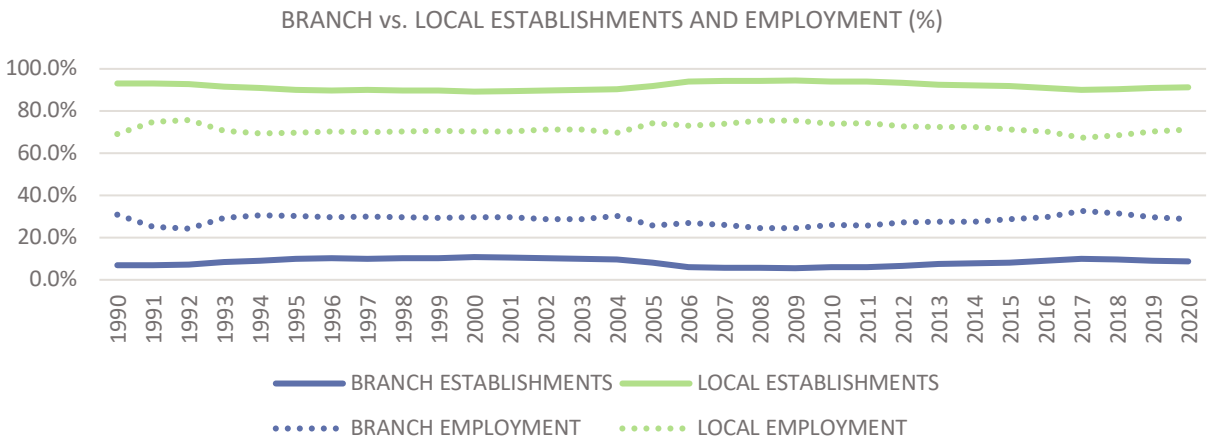
NAICS	INDUSTRY DESCRIPTION	ESTABLISHMENTS			EMPLOYMENT		
		1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020	1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020
924110	Administration of Air and Water Resource and Solid Waste Management Programs	1	1	-1	6	15	-18
325314	Fertilizer (Mixing Only) Manufacturing	1	-1	-1	13	-25	-18
238220	Plumbing, Heating, and Air-Conditioning Contractors	-5	5	-9	2	13	-19
111199	All Other Grain Farming	-10	15	-9	-21	24	-19
112120	Dairy Cattle and Milk Production	19	8	-43	75	-36	-19
561612	Security Guards and Patrol Services	1	0	-1	20	0	-20
561311	Employment Placement Agencies	-1	2	-2	-80	20	-20
721211	RV (Recreational Vehicle) Parks and Campgrounds	2	2	-4	4	16	-20
531210	Offices of Real Estate Agents and Brokers	7	8	-7	21	33	-21
541110	Offices of Lawyers	0	12	-10	-12	41	-34
722511	Full-Service Restaurants	3	3	-8	25	-40	-45
453998	All Other Miscellaneous Store Retailers (except Tobacco Stores)	0	8	0	-4	105	-55
321911	Wood Window and Door Manufacturing	0	1	0	0	-8	-58
525190	Other Insurance Funds	0	1	-1	0	62	-62
561990	All Other Support Services	8	521	-403	17	653	-479

### Branch and local establishments

Vernon County is dominated by locally-owned establishments, defined as those with a single location or the headquarters operations of businesses with more than one establishment. Branch establishments remained relatively constant over time,

around 10 percent of the county total. These establishments do tend to have more employees than their local counterparts, accounting for about 30 percent of jobs. This has also remained steady over time.

The percentage shares of local and branch establishments vary across sectors. The highest shares of branch establishments are



found in public administration and educational services, which is also dominated by government (public schools). Finance and insurance is the only other sector with a relatively high (37.1 percent) share of branch establishments, while the remaining sectors have under a 20 percent share.

In sectors chiefly comprised of non-government establishments, sectors with the largest number of branch establishments include retail trade (19), finance and insurance (13), and transportation and warehousing (9). Many sectors with the largest number of establishments have a very low percentage of branch establishments. These include agriculture, forestry, and fishing (1.8 percent); construction (1.6 percent); professional, scientific, and technical services (2.8 percent), administrative support and waste management and remediation services (0.0 percent), and other services (1.8 percent).

## Startups and survival

Startups have played an important role in changes within the local economy, with 3,016 startups between 1990 and 2020. This is an average of about 100 per year, but the pace of startup formation has been uneven, only partially matching a pattern in the larger economy. There was an increase in startups

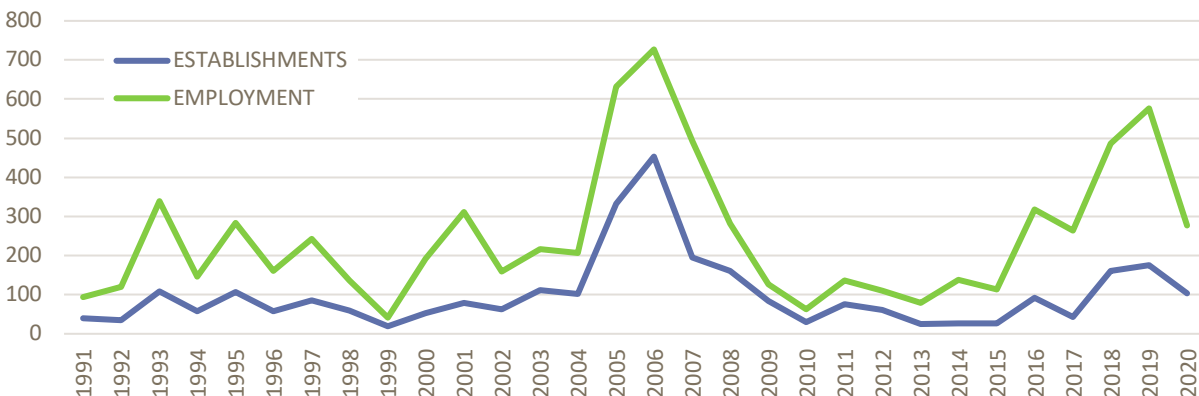
prior to the Great Recession. Across most of the country, there was a further increase as the lack of jobs forced many people to look to starting their own business as an alternative. This is not the case with Vernon County, where startup activity dropped to the lowest level seen in the 30-year period. In recent years the number of startups is again rising, as is the case across the state and nation.

Vernon County is unusual in that it shows a large number of agricultural business starts. This is uncommon even in most rural counties, and reflects the growth of specialty agriculture in the area. Many of these farms are also engaged in value-added agriculture which is not appearing in the business statistics.

Several other sectors are producing large numbers of startups, but at the level of individual industries, 56 of more than 1,000 possible industries generated 2,012 startups, or 66.7 percent of the total. These industries overwhelmingly serve a local to regional market, aside from agriculture and potentially some businesses in professional, scientific, and technical services.

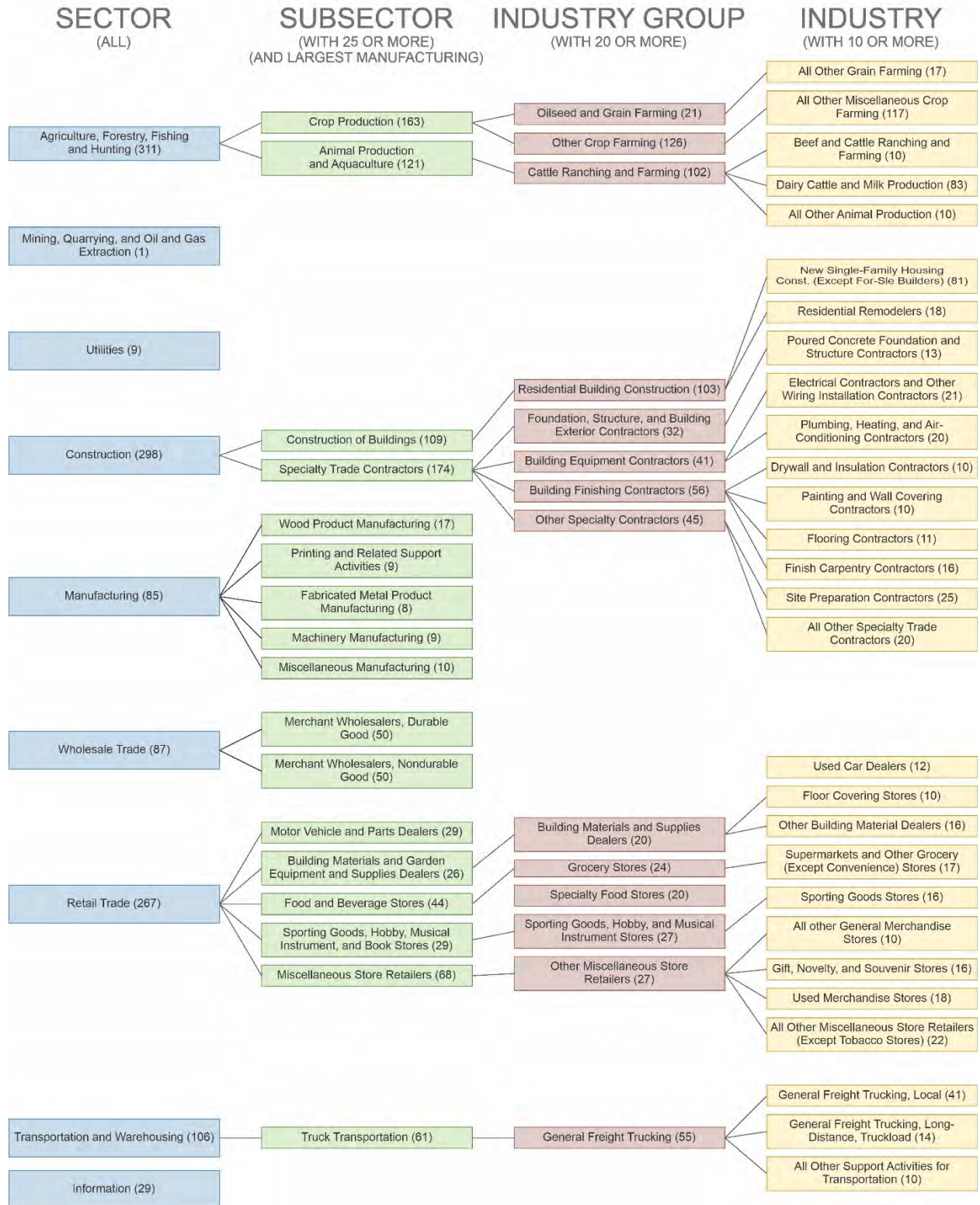
There were 85 manufacturing startups, or about three per year. The subsectors with the most startups included wood product manufacturing (17), printing and related

STARTUP ESTABLISHMENTS AND EMPLOYMENT

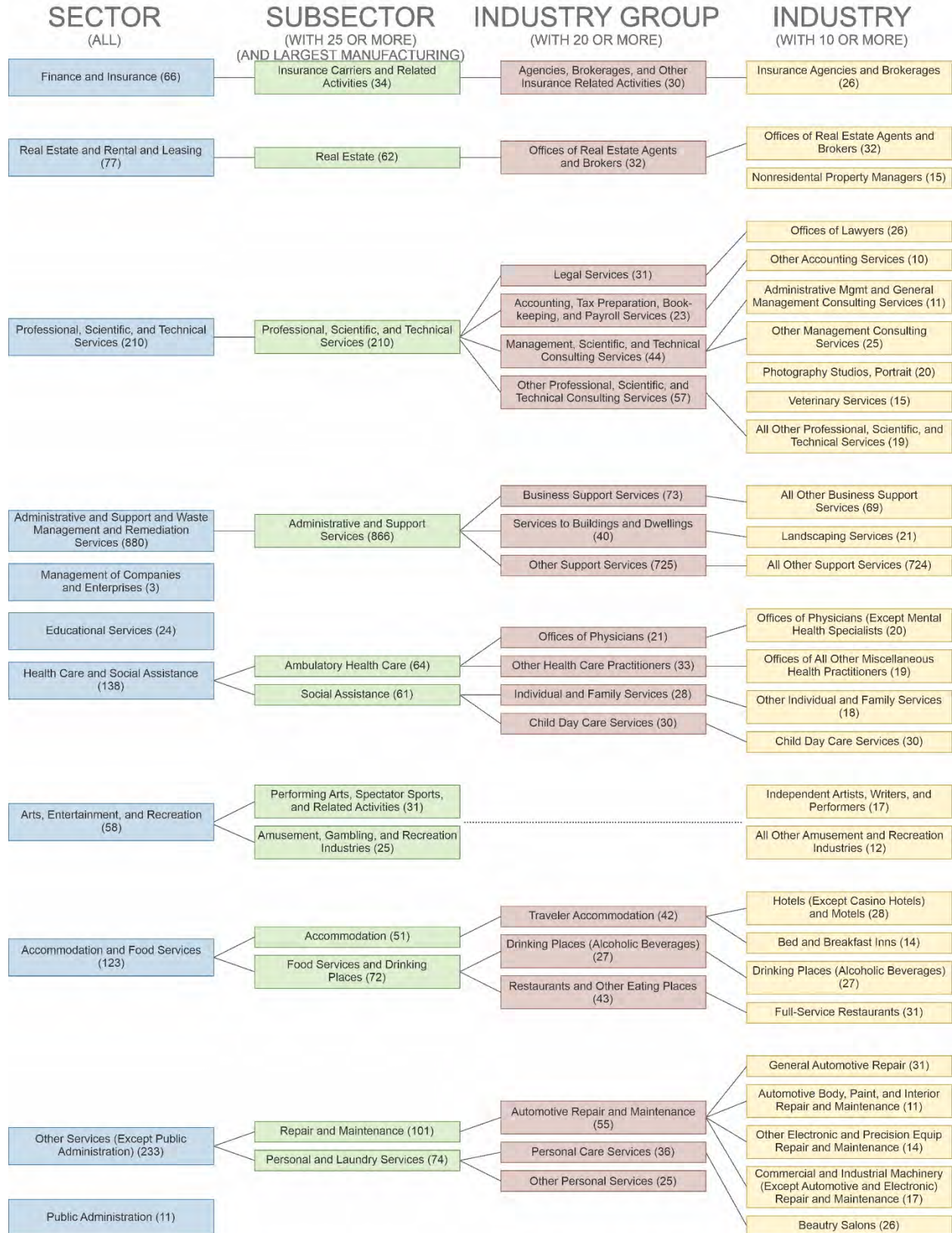




# STARTUPS BY INDUSTRY 1990 TO 2020



# STARTUPS BY INDUSTRY 1990 TO 2020





support activities (9), fabricated metal product manufacturing (8), machinery manufacturing (9), and miscellaneous manufacturing (10).

## Business attraction

Manufacturing is often the primary target of business attraction efforts, as it tends to have large numbers of jobs with good wages, and generates additional economic impacts through spending on goods and services. An examination of how this sector has changed in the last 30 years suggests that business attraction is not a significant source of the county's growth.

In 1990, branch establishments totaled just four of the county's 30 manufacturing establishments. The last of these four closed in 2006. By 2020, there were still just four branch manufacturing establishments among the 42 in Vernon County. All four are headquartered in Wisconsin, while two are branch plants of Prairie Ready Mix.

Nine more branch manufacturing establishments opened and closed over the three decades. Five of these were not associated with a business headquartered in Vernon County, including two cement plants.

Five of 25 local manufacturing establishments listed in 1990 were still in operation in 2020. Overall, the number of local manufacturing establishments grew from 25 to 38. The sector had grown steadily through 2008 and 2009, when there were a total of 65

establishments, but has been in decline since that time.

A total of 122 local manufacturing establishments have existed for some period of time in Vernon County. With 26 existing in 1990, and 38 new ones existing in 2020, living 58 that have started and subsequently closed. Even so, all net increases in the number of manufacturing establishments have been through local startups.

Branch establishments accounted for 174 of 299 manufacturing jobs in 1990, or 58.2 percent of the total. That number doubled by 2020, as did the total number of manufacturing jobs, so that 364 jobs at branch manufacturing establishments made up 41.1 percent of 886 total manufacturing jobs.

Vernon County faces an uphill battle in trying to attract new manufacturing and related industries. Over the past two decades, counties with a population under 20,000 (such as Vernon County) have seen their share of the nation's manufacturing decline from 11.7 to 9.6 percent. Many concerns, such as proximity to markets, accessibility and transportation costs, and especially, the availability of labor have led to an increasing concentration of manufacturing in the suburban areas surrounding large metropolitan areas. What little manufacturing still favors rural locations is overwhelmingly local companies, or new ones targeting untapped local resources.

## APPENDIX G: CHILDCARE ANALYSIS

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Vernon County, like elsewhere in Wisconsin, faces rising childcare costs and reduced capacity. Interviews with employers confirmed that childcare is a barrier to work for many working-class families, further exacerbating the challenge of labor supply in a tight labor market,

“Affordable childcare” is defined as services costing no more than seven percent of a family’s household income. For the median Vernon County household making \$60,041 per year, that equates to childcare costing \$4,203 per year or \$350 per month. However, a recent report “Priced Out: The Steep Cost of Childcare in Wisconsin” found that the average cost for center-based care was \$12,272 per year for a toddler, \$11,125 for a child in preschool, and \$10,244 for a school-aged child. According to the figures, child care costs three times the amount the average Vernon County household can afford to pay.

The high cost of and limited availability of childcare is being driven in part by low wages within the industry. As wages for competing entry-level occupations have gone up, childcare wages have not kept pace, contributing to a 15.9 percent decline in the number of childcare workers in Wisconsin between 2015 and 2021. The recent pandemic also significantly impacted the childcare industry, with many centers closing or employees leaving their jobs.

**Demand for childcare.** According to the US Census and Place Dynamics population projections, there are 2,128 children between the ages of 0 and 4, with another 2,210 children between the ages of 5 and 9, and 2,281 children between the ages of 10 and 14. The 0 to 4 cohort is expected to increase 9.5 percent over the next ten years, suggesting

early infant childcare may be a particularly challenging need to address in the county.

CHILDREN IN VERNON COUNTY

AGE GROUP	2023	2033	Percent Change
0 to 4	2,128	2,330	9.5%
5 to 9	2,210	2,209	0.0%
10 to 14	2,281	2,183	-4.3%

The county’s Amish and Mennonite population may impact these numbers and the need for childcare suggested by the data. These tend to be large households with a disproportionately high number of children who would not be in the market for childcare outside of the home or community.

**Options for childcare.** In Wisconsin, parents and caregivers have two options for regulated child care—licensed or certified. Licensed providers can care for four or more unrelated children under the age of seven. Certified providers are voluntarily regulated and can provide care for up to three unrelated children under the age of seven.

There are 15 licensed child care centers in Vernon County, according to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. All but four of the providers are located in Westby or Viroqua, with few or no facilities in the western, southern, and eastern portions of the county. So-called “childcare deserts” have become increasingly common in Wisconsin. An estimated 70 percent of rural Wisconsin does not have access to nearby childcare.

**Childcare initiatives.** One-time Federal funding through the CARES Act and Childcare Counts helped supplement wages for childcare workers during the pandemic, ending in the second half of 2023. Those



CHILDCARE CENTERS IN VERNON COUNTY

Facility	Type of Care	Location	Ages Served	Day Capacity	Vacancies Reported
Westby Head Start Center	Licensed Group	Westby	3 to 6 years	17	0
Little Tree Kinderhaus	Licensed Family	Viroqua	6 weeks to 13 years	8	0
Kids At Play Child Care Center	Licensed Group	Stoddard	6 weeks to 12 years	75	0
Miles Of Smiles Childcare Center	Licensed Group	Westby	6 weeks to 11 years	45	5
Kathy's Kidcare	Licensed Family	Westby	4 weeks to 13 years	8	0
Viroqua Children's House Montessori	Licensed Group	Viroqua	21 weeks to 14 years	49	4
Lori's Day Care	Licensed Family	De Soto	6 weeks to 13 years	8	0
Viroqua Day Care Learning Center	Licensed Group	Viroqua	6 weeks to 12 years	35	10
Pitter Patter Daycare	Licensed Family	Westby	6 weeks to 9 years	8	0
Vas Early Learning Center	Licensed Group	Viroqua	6 weeks to 11 years	108	0
Tammy's For Tots	Licensed Family	Ontario	1 weeks to 13 years	8	0
Acorn To Oak Youth Development Ctr	Licensed Group	Viroqua	5 years to 13 years	36	26
Lana's Day Care	Reg. Certified	Viroqua	8 weeks to 12 years	6	3
Cuddly Care LLC	Licensed Family	Chaseburg	4 weeks to 13 years	8	0
Home Away From Home Day Care	Licensed Family	Westby	6 weeks to 12 years	8	0
TOTAL				427	48

wages still did not keep pace with similar occupations. With the expiration of that funding, childcare facilities are increasingly struggling to attract and retain workers. These businesses are caught in a catch-22 situation: raising wages would require charging more per child, but families are not able to pay more (and many can't afford childcare already.)

A recent bill before the state legislature would provide two refundable credits for employer provided childcare services. The first credit is for up to \$100,000 for businesses to establish their own day care facilities for their workers, or pay for non-profit providers to do so. The second part of the legislation is an employer credit up to \$3,000 per child to cover costs to operate a childcare facility or provide a benefit to an employee to access a third-party childcare facility.

While this initiative, if passed, will improve the situation, it is unlikely to be a full solution. Many small and medium-sized businesses such as those dominating Vernon County likely will not be able to afford to take

advantage of the program. At the local level, employers can help alleviate the situation by providing flex time and work from home options for their employees, but these options are not available to many Vernon County workers in hourly positions including those in service, retail, hospitality, and manufacturing industries.

Traditional approaches to addressing childcare have been insufficient to tackle the problem. Absent a much broader state and federal support system to defray costs, local initiatives have focused on partnerships. The Viroqua Area Schools Early Learning Center, which opened in spring 2023, serves children six weeks to eleven years of age. The new facility increases local capacity to provide childcare, but that capacity can only be realized if there are sufficient childcare workers available. Stakeholders expressed concerns that increased competition for childcare workers would result in the closure of existing facilities, thereby minimizing the positive impact of a new facility.





# Vernon County Economic Development Strategy and Plan 2024 - 2029



*Vernon County*  
WISCONSIN  
**FERTILE GROUND**  
*for*  
**DOING BUSINESS**





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## Executive Summary

This plan and corresponding strategies are prepared for Vernon County through its Economic Development Committee with additional guidance from their Economic Development Coordinator. The Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission (MRRPC) has been contracted by Vernon County to produce Economic Development (ED) Strategies for the County to identify actions that support two of their ED Goals to:

1. Support and Retain Current Business
2. Skilled Workforce Development and Youth Retention

MRRPC has conducted both quantitative and qualitative research to identify those factors that led to the recommendations contained in this Plan. All data has been analyzed to assess current conditions, identify trends, and uncover opportunities for improvement. Additional information on the County has been included as reference material to assist in understanding the components that influence the area's economy. To gain local perspective, MRRPC put out an electronic survey, held focus groups and conducted personal interviews. There were 111 responses to the Qualtrics survey, 28 participants at the focus groups held in Hillsboro, DeSoto and Westby, and an additional 42 personal interviews conducted around the County (both in person and by telephone). Based on the research, people choose Vernon County to live, work and play for its:

- Rural Character and Driftless Vibe
- Natural Beauty and Environmental Quality
- Unique Culture
- Sense of Community
- Good Schools and Good Healthcare
- Easy Proximity to Larger Cities

This Plan aims to build off the initial ED strategy developed by Place Dynamics in October 2017 and all the subsequent work completed since then by the ED Committee and its ED Coordinator. The recommended strategies will layout actions to help the County achieve the two goals MRRPC has been tasked to focus on.

## Strategies for the Two Specified County Economic Development Goals

### **To support and retain current business.**

**1. Formalize the County Economic Development Coordinator position as a county employee and a department rather than a contract position.** This is a natural progression from the contracted role in the evolution of County level economic development. Dedicate resources,

some administrative assistance and a budget to support ongoing ED activities (beyond the current ED Committee budget) and establishing long-term goals for the role. By elevating the position and making it more financially attractive (direct compensation plus benefits), the County will create a stable environment to enable the ED professional to leverage local investments for long term benefit and develop deeper relationships with business/community leaders and other ED partnering organizations for the betterment of Vernon County. This action also signals to all stakeholders a higher level of intentionality and direction for the County with regards to Economic Development. There are other possible structures for professional Economic Development at the County level, however, at this time, utilizing the County structure for employment should be the most expedient and seamless effort to migrate from the contract role to fully employed professional status. This model also maintains consistency with the County Committee governance model that oversees and manages the ED staff and provides direction/oversite for ED activities.

**2. Enhance the Business Retention Expansion (BRE) Program to systematize business visits across the County with a goal of meeting with all businesses each year and, where/when possible, try to include a representative from the local community and the region/state on the visit.** These visits promote goodwill and show the business that the community is interested in their success, as well as educating the visitors on the opportunities and challenges that each business faces. Projects will stem from these visits and resources can be explained that may provide needed assistance to the business. Track visits and record key notes from each visit in a file or database that can be referenced. The goal is to help businesses grow in Vernon County. According to the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), about 80% of new jobs and capital investment come from businesses that already exist in your community.

**3. Collaborate with communities, developers, businesses, and others to increase affordable housing stock across the County.** To attract employees to Vernon County, there needs to be available housing in the County. Post Covid, people are being more selective on “where” they “want” to live, and Vernon County’s population is growing and having available housing will assist the continuation of that trend. Review section on Workforce (affordable) Housing for additional ideas and information.

**4. Encourage and support collaboration for the development of additional openings with existing Childcare facilities as well as creating new Childcare facilities around the County as needed.** It can be a challenge for potential workers to find reliable and affordable Childcare which prevents them from entering/reentering the workforce.

**5. Market the activities of the new department and county position.** Resources need to be dedicated to making sure the ED success stories and projects (that can be publicized) are shared across the County. People learn from examples and success breeds success. Utilize all forms of

electronic tools (website, social media, email blasts, newsletter, Annual Report, etc...) and traditional media/methods (Press Releases, post cards, flyers for events, printed Annual Report, regular presentations by staff/committee, brochures, a Visitor Guide, etc...). Partner with other organizations and communities to spread costs and expand the reach of each message whenever possible.

**6. Involve local businesspeople in County Economic Development.** Continue events like the Vernon County Business Awards and look for opportunities to engage people throughout the year. Consider creating subcommittees of the Economic Development Committee to work on specific projects. Utilize learnings from BRE visits to sponsor/coordinate group training events around topics of interest that can add value to area businesses. Regularly meet with ED partnering organizations (such as VEDA, Seven Rivers, WEDC, WEDA, WHEDA, Coulee Cap, area Chambers, MRRPC, others) to understand how best to support and compliment each other to leverage resources and avoid duplication of service.

**7. Continue developing and promoting initiatives that improve/enhance the “Quality of Life” in Vernon County for residents and guests.** Be aware of area activities and efforts that can impact the County from expanding Broadband (high speed internet/fiber to homes and businesses) to maintaining infrastructure (roads, bridges, water, sewer, electric, transit, and other services). People choose where they want to live/work/play so help make Vernon County a top destination for them.

**To gain skilled workforce development and youth retention.**

**1. Collaborate with Western Technical College (WTC), local school districts and the Western Wisconsin Workforce Development Board to identify the gap between the skills prospective employees need to have and the skills employers want/need to fill positions.** Information gathered from the BRE Program will help define the skills needed by area employers.

**2. Connect employers with programs like: Youth Apprenticeships, Career Exploration, Career Pathways, Job Fairs, Job Shadowing, etc... through area school districts, Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA), the Technical Colleges and area Universities and Colleges.** By educating students in middle and high school on area career opportunities and the people, processes and paths to seize those opportunities, the County increases the number of youth that will remain in the County after graduation as well as increasing the number of young adults that return to the County after gaining advanced education and experience outside of the County.

**3. Work with WTC to increase utilization of the Viroqua campus to offer more education and training opportunities in the County.** Expand courses to include certificate training, professional certifications, continuing education units and custom training based on employer needs.

**4. Successful efforts on the previous goal “Support and Retain Current Business” will also impact the ability to upskill the workforce to meet employers needs and continue to grow area businesses which will provide more employment opportunities to retain young people and attract more young people to Vernon County.** Also, creating a place with activities and experiences that young people want to engage in makes the County more desirable. The need for available and affordable housing is essential to attract and keep younger workers who are just starting out.

### **Measuring for Success**

Enlightened leaders know that proper metrics generally lead to improvement. Economic Development metrics need to be established for the Vernon County effort and they need to focus on the things that the organization can control/do as well as those being regularly reported by credible and accessible sources. ED specific metrics under direct control can be: Annual number of BRE visits, Annual number of grants applied for, Number of Special Events held/sponsored, Number of press releases submitted, Creation/distribution of an Annual Report of Activities, Creation/distribution of a County Visitor Guide, etc... ED metrics provided by reputable third-party sources can be: Labor Participation Rate, Unemployment Rate, Median and Mean Household Income, Level of Education Attainment, % of income spent on Housing (Rent/Mortgage), Population and Age by Census Tract, Number of New Businesses in the County, etc... Develop metrics that are primarily objective and based on facts with some subjective criteria used to measure intangible attributes of performance.



## Workforce (affordable) Housing

Both our survey and discussions with key stakeholders and business owners identified the need for more affordable housing stock. Developing affordable workforce housing requires collaboration among community members, local government, businesses, non-profit organizations, and most importantly private developers and builders. These developers are in business to make money and are facing many hurdles like labor shortages, cost of materials, land acquisition and holding costs, infrastructure development (sewer, water, phone, electric, roads, sidewalk, internet and more). They must also cover the increasing cost of subcontractors providing additional services for the project. It is also important to remember there are several types of “Affordable Housing Programs” and most if not, all government subsidized housing do not allow for home ownership and the development of equity that comes with owning a home. We are suggesting a focus on workforce housing “affordable” to our service, retail, and entry level employees in the county.

Successful affordable housing development often requires a combination of several strategies tailored to the specific needs and context of the community. Collaboration and ongoing community engagement are key factors in ensuring the success and sustainability of affordable housing initiatives. You will need to facilitate a positive discussion, generate great ideas, and then develop ambassadors to defend the ideas and move the projects forward.

### Public-Private Partnerships



Most projects looking for these affordable housing outcomes will require partnerships and collaboration to mitigate the hurdles mentioned above. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) can encourage collaboration between local government and private developers to share resources and reduce initial and holding costs. Also partnerships with non-profit organizations that specialize in affordable housing development can be used to develop new housing and refurbish existing homes.

### Land Use Policies

For communities to truly be involved in the process, they must first look at their land use policies. This include density, lot size and

multifamily development. Even more creative solutions may include Inclusionary Zoning, and mixed income zoning regulations that require a certain percentage of new developments to include affordable housing units. Financial incentives like tax credits that provide incentives for developers who build workforce housing units. Subsidies and grants that allocate public funds to subsidize the construction or renovation of affordable housing repaid through the revenue generated by new property taxes.

#### Public Ownership and Development

The most significant option may be public ownership and development of lots and neighborhoods where the final projects are approved by the community. For comparison many if not most cities have industrial parks where they encourage the type of business development they feel best fits the community. These entities use tax incremental financing to help businesses start and grow. This same concept can be used to build entire neighborhoods that have specifically priced housing units complete with amenities like parks, schools, day care, healthcare, retail and more.

#### New Zoning and Building Regulations

Communities will also need to allow for flexibility in zoning and building regulations to accommodate affordable housing projects. Smaller lots, more efficient homes, some manufactured housing, shared resources, mixed use development, accessory dwelling units and more can become part of the mix in quality workforce housing. Please note, a dense well designed housing development does not have to be the “trailer park” of yesterday.



#### Land Preservation

These new neighborhoods can also be used to support the land you want to preserve for recreation or nature. Conservancy developments or community land trusts can be supported by a small section of land set aside for a well-planned housing development.

#### Conclusion

Following is a substantial commitment by the Governor to work with communities on housing for Wisconsin. Vernon County has an opportunity to lead in this area. MRRPC would be pleased to work with the County to develop a strategy to attract more quality economic development by creating an even greater place to live in Wisconsin.

## From Governor Evers Year End Review

### Investing in Affordable Housing for Working Families

Since 2019, the Evers Administration has helped build more than 14,000 units of affordable housing through state and federally funded grants administered by WHEDA, DOA, WEDC, and other state agencies.

Gov. Evers has proposed robust provisions and investments to expand access to housing statewide. This past year, the governor was proud to sign a [bipartisan package of legislation](#) creating innovative, new programs at the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) to help expand access to safe, affordable housing for working families. The 2023-25 budget signed by Gov. Evers [provided](#) one of the largest state investments in affordable housing in state history—\$525 million—to fund the programs created through bipartisan legislation, including:

- \$50 million in one-time funds to WHEDA, which, as a result of the governor’s constitutional line-item veto authority, can be used to support a housing rehabilitation program to offer grants or forgivable loans to low- to moderate-income households to renovate or repair their current home and address hazards like lead and mold;
- \$275 million in one-time funds for the newly created Residential Housing Infrastructure Revolving Loan Fund at WHEDA to provide low-interest loans that support the creation of new affordable and senior housing;
- \$100 million in one-time dollars to fund the newly created Main Street Housing Rehabilitation Revolving Loan fund—now called the Restore Main Street Loan Program—at WHEDA to provide low-interest loans to improve rental workforce housing on the second or third floor of existing buildings;
- \$100 million in one-time funding for the newly created Commercial-to-Housing Conversion Revolving Loan Fund—now called the Vacancy-to-Vitality Loan Program—at WHEDA to provide loans for the conversion of vacant commercial buildings to new residential developments of workforce or senior housing; and
- Increasing the limit on notes and bonds that WHEDA can issue that are secured by a capital reserve fund from \$800 million to \$1 billion to continue to finance projects supported with an allocation of state and federal housing tax credits.

In December, Gov. Evers and WHEDA [launched](#) two of the new loan programs that were funded in the 2023-25 budget, the Restore Main Street and Vacancy-to-Vitality Loan Programs.

- The Restore Main Street Loan Program provides loan funding for building owners to cover the costs of improving housing located on the second or third floors of an existing building with commercial space on the ground level. Borrowers can apply for up to \$20,000 per housing unit or 25 percent of the total rehabilitation cost at a low interest rate of three percent or one percent in municipalities with a population of less than 10,000.
- The Vacancy-to-Vitality Loan Program allows a developer to apply for a loan to cover the costs of converting a vacant commercial building to workforce or senior housing. Developers can apply for up to \$1 million or 20 percent of the total project cost, including land at a low interest rate of three percent or one percent in municipalities with a population of less than 10,000 or senior housing.

DOA, through the Wisconsin Help for Homeowners Program, helped over 8,200 Wisconsin homeowners stay in their homes through \$65 million in assistance from federal ARPA funds.

In December, Gov. Evers also [announced](#) the new federally funded and created HOME-American Rescue Plan program, providing nearly \$42 million to support efforts to provide safe, affordable housing and supportive services for low-income and housing-insecure households. The program is being administered by DOA's Division of Energy, Housing and Community Resources, and it will benefit those experiencing homelessness, those at risk of experiencing homelessness, or those in other vulnerable populations.

Gov. Evers and WHEDA [announced](#) developers of affordable multifamily housing will receive over \$32 million in federal and state tax credits to help address Wisconsin's housing shortage. In total, the 23 developments receiving tax credits will provide over 1,500 new affordable housing units in both urban and rural communities seeking housing for their workers, families, and seniors.

Before the end of the year, the WHEDA Foundation will award \$2 million in housing grants to 53 organizations in 27 counties throughout Wisconsin. These grants will create or improve 1,668 beds and housing units that will provide emergency shelter, transitional residences, and extremely low-income housing.

Beginning in 2023, WHEDA capped annual rental increases to five percent per year for federally or state-subsidized affordable housing. This policy applies to existing residents in properties utilizing state or federal housing tax credits.

WHEDA's Single Family Team closed a record \$73 million in loans in September, beating the highest recorded total from 2018 by \$10 million. In total, the year-to-date lending as of December 6 reached a total of 1,524 loans totaling more than \$442 million.

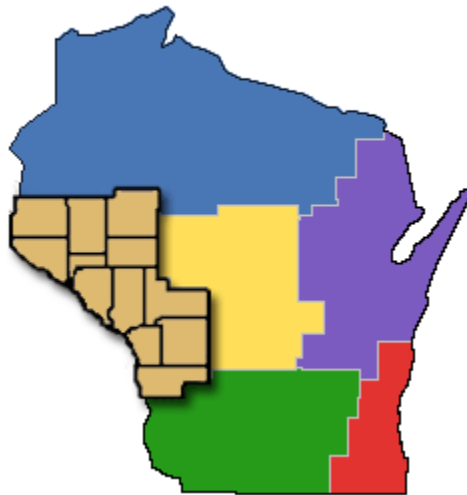


## Vernon County Housing Statistics

The following information comes from the [Wisconsin Realtors Association \(WRA\)](#). Please refer to their website for up-to-date statistics.

All county figures on sales volume and median prices are compiled by the WRA and are not seasonally adjusted. Median prices are only computed if the county recorded at least 10 home sales in the quarter. All data collected by the WRA is subject to revision if more complete data becomes available. Beginning in June 2018, all historical sales volume and median price data from 2015 forward at the county level have been re-benchmarked using the Relitix system that accesses MLS data directly. Data prior to January 2015 is derived from the Techmark system that also accessed MLS data directly. The Wisconsin Housing Affordability Index is updated monthly with the most recent data on median housing prices, mortgage rates and estimated median family income data for Wisconsin.

Find out the number of home sales and the median price of a home by county. Simply select the region using the dropdown menu, then select the county from the new dropdown menu that appears.



## Housing Stats by Month

### Number of Home Sales

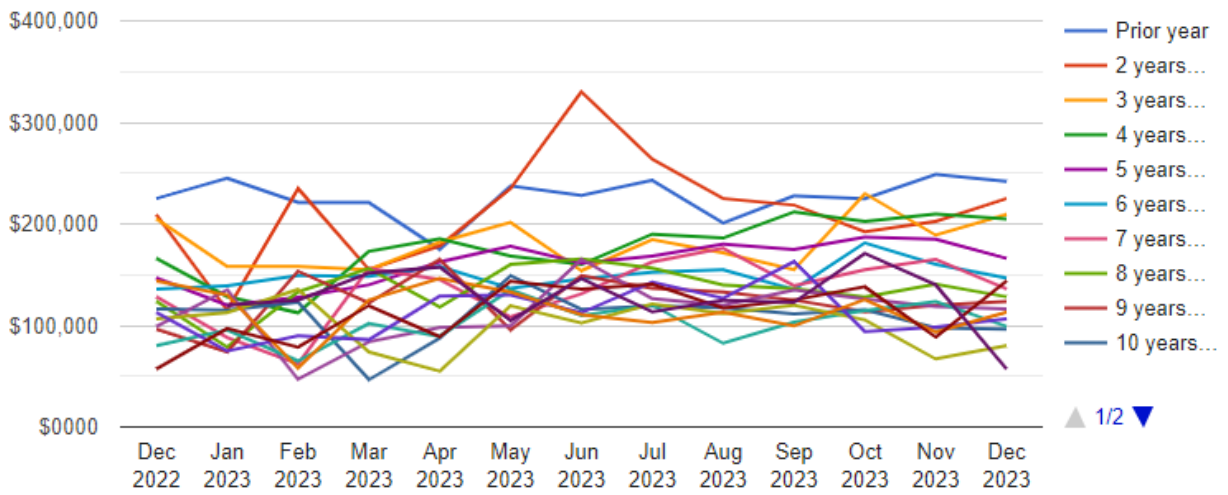
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	YTD
2007	6	12	11	11	17	14	16	26	16	20	11	8	168
2008	10	10	10	7	18	16	12	18	11	16	6	9	143
2009	3	7	11	8	14	14	18	12	9	20	10	15	141
2010	9	5	6	13	19	20	10	11	13	13	12	9	140
2011	8	8	13	11	10	12	16	15	18	12	7	15	145
2012	10	9	15	10	19	14	14	14	9	18	12	11	155
2013	9	5	9	14	17	14	18	15	19	22	16	14	172
2014	9	9	10	20	24	23	14	23	12	24	19	12	199
2015	12	6	18	19	28	27	24	25	21	16	20	14	230
2016	13	13	25	11	18	30	25	29	21	21	16	10	232
2017	15	7	12	10	20	54	27	28	30	31	16	22	272
2018	12	18	18	25	28	29	28	34	29	24	31	14	290
2019	10	15	13	20	23	36	30	35	24	25	19	17	267
2020	10	8	25	31	22	24	43	37	32	34	44	29	339
2021	19	20	23	39	32	27	22	24	29	28	33	32	328
2022	13	15	13	22	21	21	16	29	32	28	22	27	259
2023	11	12	22	13	13	30	25	19	34	23	28	21	251

### Median Price

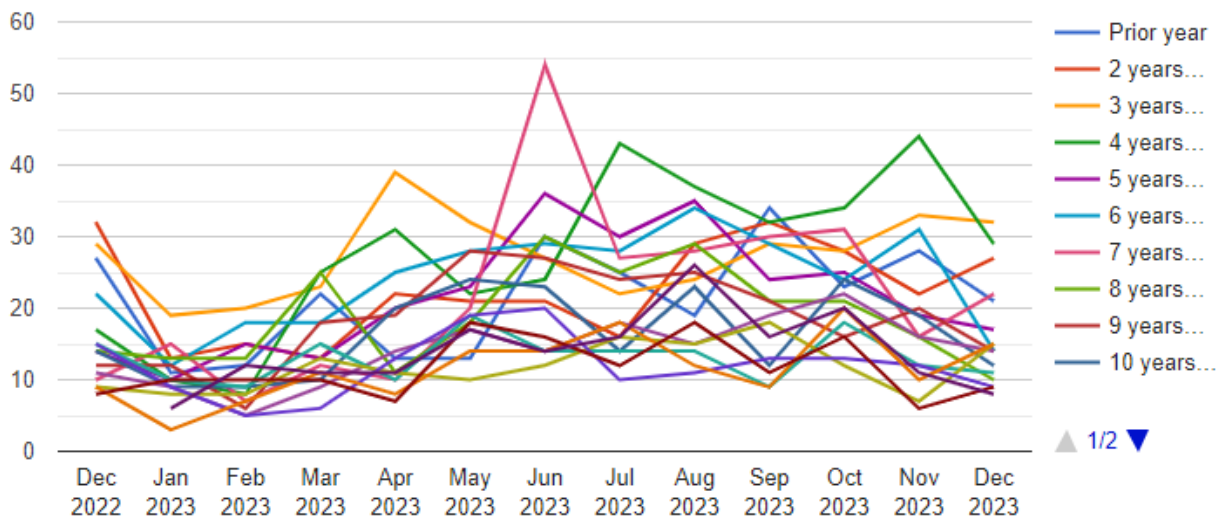
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	YTD
2007	\$120,000	\$124,750	\$151,500	\$157,500	\$105,000	\$146,250	\$113,500	\$124,750	\$122,700	\$170,950	\$140,000	\$57,000	\$123,450
2008	\$97,000	\$78,500	\$119,500	\$89,000	\$143,500	\$135,920	\$140,500	\$117,000	\$125,000	\$138,000	\$88,450	\$143,900	\$128,000
2009	\$130,000	\$58,000	\$125,000	\$146,250	\$132,825	\$110,587	\$102,750	\$113,000	\$99,500	\$125,500	\$93,750	\$113,000	\$115,000
2010	\$75,000	\$89,900	\$86,000	\$128,900	\$130,000	\$112,500	\$142,500	\$127,000	\$163,000	\$94,000	\$98,250	\$106,500	\$118,950
2011	\$112,750	\$135,450	\$74,000	\$55,000	\$119,500	\$102,500	\$120,950	\$112,000	\$119,750	\$105,500	\$67,000	\$80,000	\$102,000
2012	\$95,500	\$65,000	\$102,000	\$89,100	\$135,000	\$109,950	\$120,000	\$82,450	\$103,100	\$114,500	\$123,500	\$99,000	\$110,000
2013	\$135,000	\$47,000	\$84,000	\$98,000	\$99,500	\$165,100	\$126,250	\$120,000	\$135,000	\$126,000	\$118,750	\$116,250	\$123,625
2014	\$115,000	\$122,900	\$46,750	\$87,500	\$149,000	\$115,875	\$119,250	\$117,500	\$111,500	\$115,500	\$97,500	\$96,250	\$115,000
2015	\$73,950	\$153,500	\$122,250	\$165,000	\$95,500	\$149,000	\$136,450	\$133,000	\$125,000	\$113,500	\$120,000	\$123,750	\$125,000
2016	\$78,674	\$133,000	\$156,000	\$118,000	\$160,000	\$165,250	\$156,500	\$139,900	\$136,000	\$128,000	\$140,500	\$128,250	\$143,750
2017	\$88,000	\$62,000	\$156,200	\$145,250	\$108,500	\$131,000	\$162,500	\$176,000	\$139,200	\$154,900	\$165,000	\$135,900	\$138,250
2018	\$139,000	\$149,000	\$148,500	\$158,000	\$136,450	\$146,000	\$152,450	\$155,000	\$135,500	\$181,250	\$160,000	\$146,750	\$152,500
2019	\$120,000	\$127,500	\$140,000	\$162,500	\$178,000	\$161,500	\$168,450	\$180,000	\$175,000	\$187,000	\$185,000	\$166,000	\$166,000
2020	\$128,500	\$112,500	\$173,000	\$185,500	\$168,250	\$160,000	\$190,000	\$186,000	\$211,950	\$202,500	\$209,950	\$205,000	\$185,900
2021	\$158,000	\$158,250	\$154,900	\$182,000	\$201,450	\$154,000	\$184,500	\$171,450	\$155,000	\$229,750	\$189,000	\$209,250	\$180,000
2022	\$115,000	\$235,000	\$155,000	\$178,450	\$235,000	\$330,000	\$263,750	\$225,000	\$218,450	\$192,450	\$202,500	\$225,000	\$215,000
2023	\$245,000	\$221,200	\$221,000	\$175,000	\$237,500	\$227,950	\$243,000	\$201,000	\$227,500	\$225,000	\$248,750	\$242,000	\$229,000

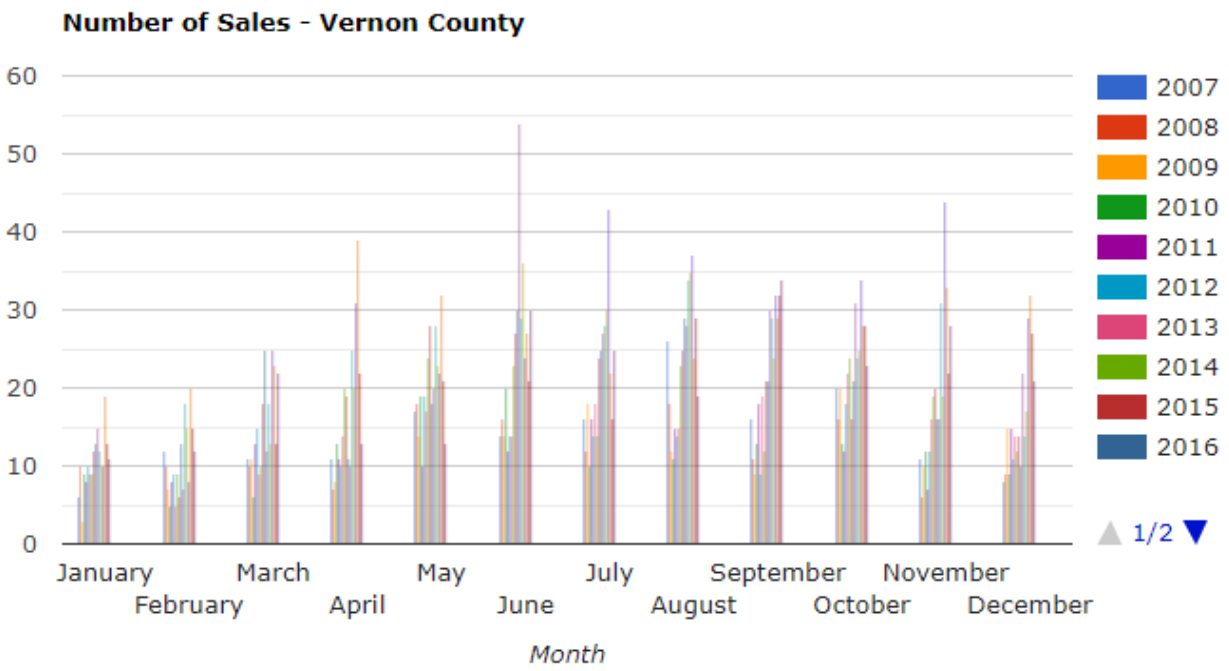
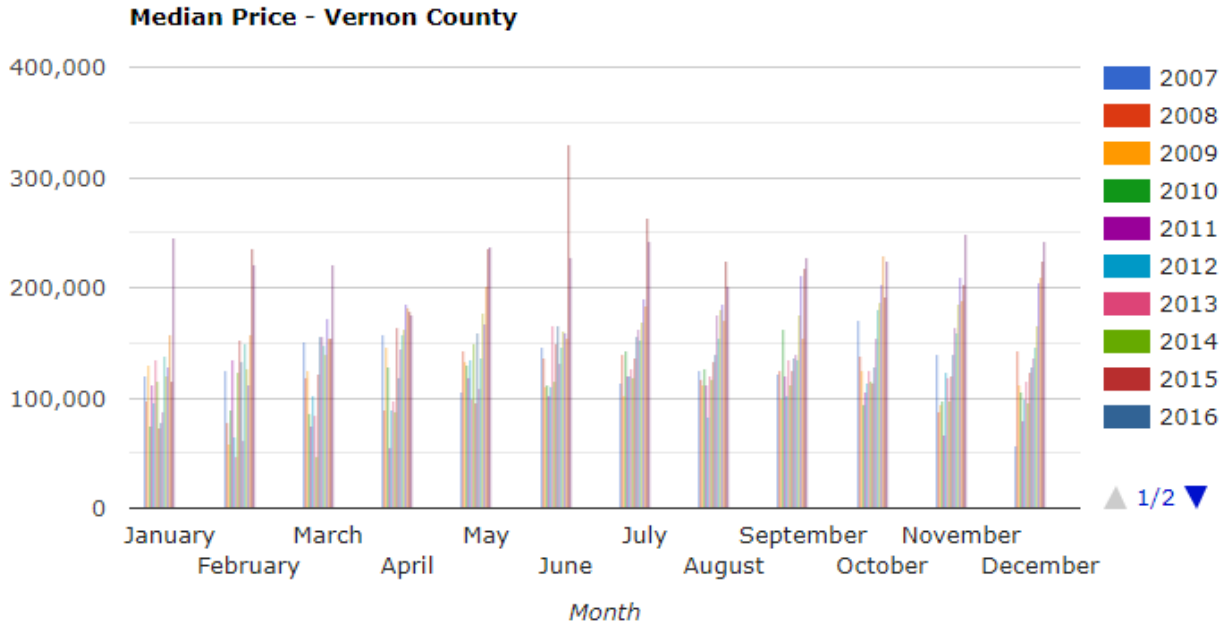
Please Note: Data is updated daily; thus will not reflect the same numbers reported in press releases.

Median Price Annual Comparison - Vernon County



Number of Sales Comparison - Vernon County







## Additional Reference Data on Vernon County

### Age

Table 1.1 County Population Projections

2000	2010	2020	2030	2040
28,056	29,773	30,714	35,300	36,150

Source: Population figures for 2000, 2010 and 2020 come from the US Census for the specified year. Population projections for 2030 and 2040 come from the Wisconsin Department of Administration, and were produced in 2013.

The population of Vernon County has been steadily increasing and is anticipated to continue according to the Wisconsin Department of Administration.

Table 1.2 Race

Race	2000		2010		2020	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Population of one race	27,920	99.5	29,499	99.1	29,828	97.1
White alone	27,723	98.8	29,085	97.7	29,315	95.4
Black or African American alone	18	0.1	109	0.4	127	0.4
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	42	0.1	61	0.2	49	0.2
Asian alone	60	0.2	92	0.3	96	0.3
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	2	0.0	7	0.0	10	0.0
Some Other Race alone	75	0.3	145	0.5	231	0.8
Population of two or more races	136	0.5	274	0.9	886	2.9
<b>Totals</b>	<b>28,056</b>		<b>29,773</b>		<b>30,714</b>	

Source: Table P1 2010, 2020 Census

Table 1.3 Age by Percentage of Population

	2000	2010	2020
5 - 14	15.8	15.0	14.6
15 - 24	12.0	11.5	11.2
25 - 34	10.0	9.6	9.7
35 - 44	15.2	12.0	10.6
45 - 54	13.7	16.0	12.0
55 - 64	9.8	12.7	15.6
65 - 74	8.2	8.1	11.2
75 - 84	6.3	5.9	5.2
85+	2.5	2.5	3.1
Median age (years)	39.1	41.2	42.0

Source: American Community Survey 2010 and 2020 – Table S0101 Age and Sex, 2000 Decennial Census

The median age is increasing in Vernon County while the percentage of “young” individuals (those aged 15-34), who are vital in replacing those who are exiting the workforce, is dropping. This can be seen in the highlighted cells in Table 1.3. Individuals aged 5 to 14 years in 2000 represented 15.8% of the Vernon County population. However, in the year 2020, when those individuals would be between the ages of 25 and 34, that percentage has dropped to 9.7% of the population. The population pyramids in Figure 1.1 also show that the portion of the population who are in or nearing retirement age is increasing, with smaller portions of the population who can replace them in the workforce. The map located on page 6 presents the percent change of both “young” and total population in each of Vernon County’s census blocks. Eastern Vernon County is losing the highest percentage of “young” individuals.

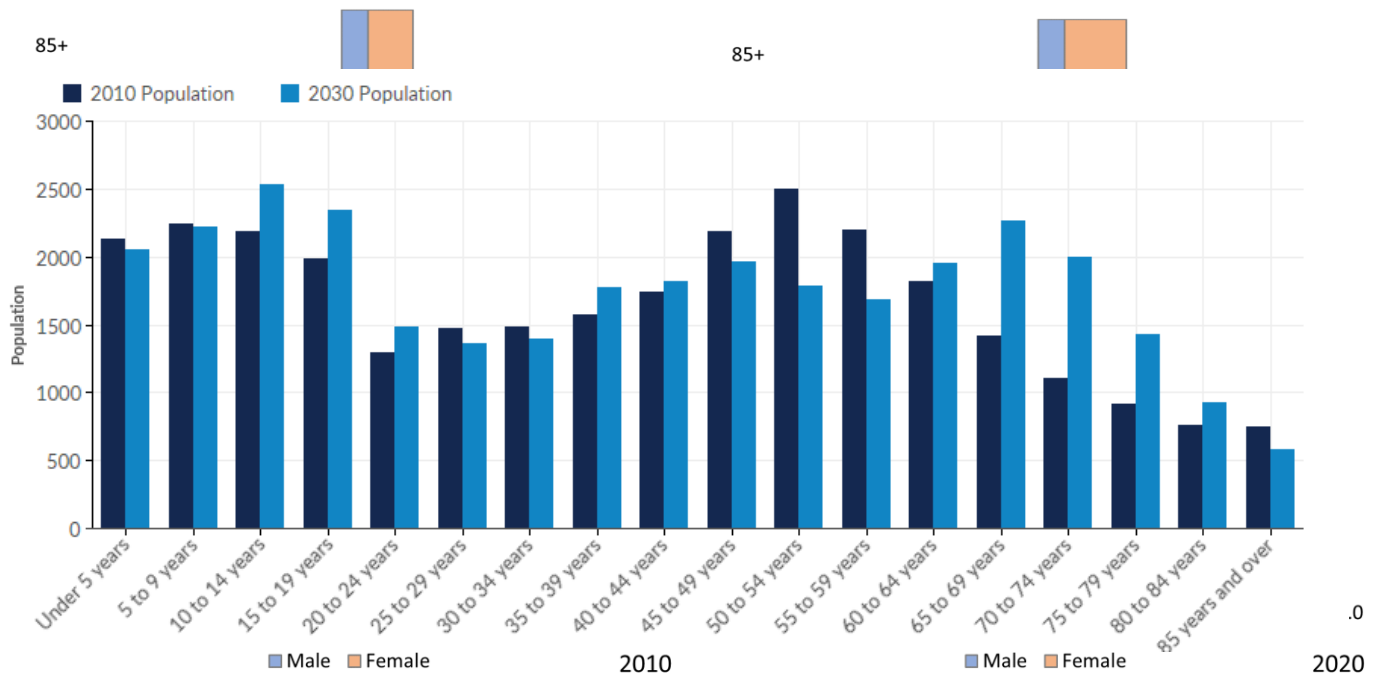


Figure 1.1 Vernon County Population Pyramids

Source: American Community Survey 2010 and 2020 – Table S0101 Age and Sex

Figure 1.2 Projected Population Change 2010-2030

Source: Lightcast™ - Population Demographics Report

Table 1.4 Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment	2010		2020	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Less than 9th grade	149	7.5	1,178	5.7
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	137	6.9	917	4.4
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	734	36.9	7,591	36.7
Some college, no degree	408	20.5	3,844	18.6
Associate's degree	185	9.3	2,440	11.8
Bachelor's degree	240	12.1	3,126	15.1
Graduate or professional degree	133	6.7	1,610	7.8

The majority of Vernon County residents are high school or college graduates. From 2010 to 2020, Vernon residents with less than ninth grade and ninth to twelfth grade levels of education have decreased or achieved higher education standing.

Source: American Community Survey 2010 and 2020 – Table B15003 Educational Attainment

Table 1.5 Young Population

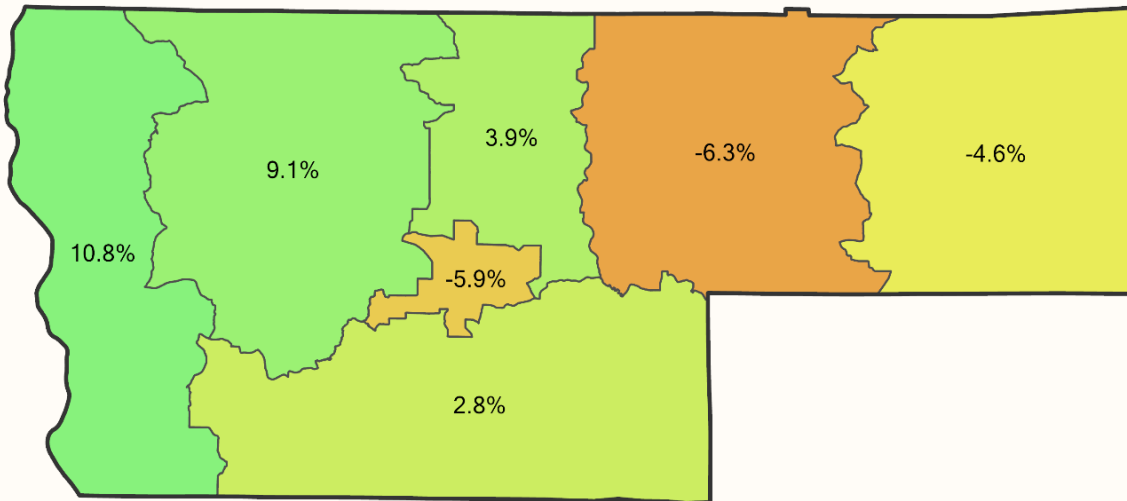
		Vernon County	Wisconsin	United States
Young Population	2010	6,216	1,499,694	83,590,450
	2020	6,410	1,509,725	88,480,498
	% Change	3.11	0.67	5.85
Total Population	2010	29,460	5,637,947	303,965,272
	2020	30,759	5,806,975	326,569,308
	% Change	10.2	3.6	7.4

Source: American Community Survey 2010 and 2020 – Table S0101 Age and Sex  
 Percent change by Census tract of Vernon County can be viewed on the following page.

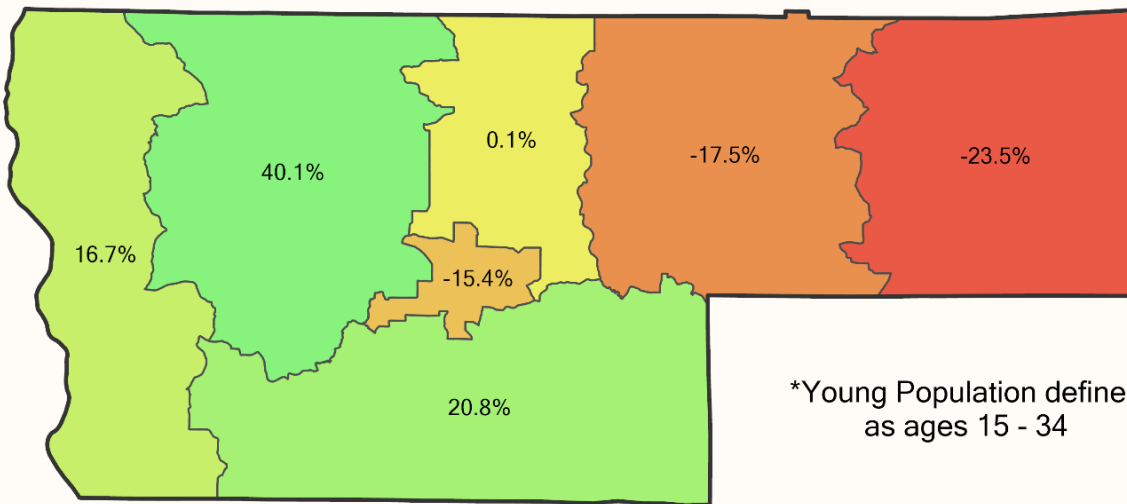
# Percent Change of Young Population in Each Census Tract (2010 - 2021)

Vernon County, WI

Total Population



Young Population



\*Young Population defined as ages 15 - 34

Population Change



Source: US Census, Table S0101 (2020) Vernon County Blocks



## Workforce

Table 1.6 Industry by Class of Worker Vernon County

	Employee of private company workers	Self-employed in own incorporated business workers	Private not-for-profit wage and salary workers	Local, State, and federal government workers	Self-employed in own not incorporated business workers and unpaid family workers	Total workers in industry
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	60.8	2.9	15.2	12.7	8.4	846
Construction	47.5	5.9	1.1	0.2	45.3	1,070
Manufacturing	71.7	5.0	2.0	7.1	14.3	1,980
Wholesale trade	94.8	0.9	0.2	0.0	4.1	418
Retail trade	89.2	1.2	4.1	1.9	3.6	1,478
Transportation and warehousing, utilities	89.2	2.4	2.4	0.2	5.8	789
Information	68.6	4.3	5.4	13.8	7.9	309
Finance and insurance, real estate and rental and leasing	70.9	1.9	15.9	6.8	4.5	498
Professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste management services	75.9	4.0	11.4	2.0	6.6	679
Educational services, health care and social assistance	66.1	7.8	11.2	1.8	13.1	3,804
Arts, entertainment, and recreation, accommodation, and food services	32.4	1.6	37.1	25.8	3.1	779
Other services	76.0	7.6	9.8	2.1	4.6	567
Public administration	32.6	2.1	50.3	0.0	15.0	496
<b>Total civilian employed population 16 years and over</b>	<b>13,713</b>	<b>60.8</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>15.2</b>	<b>12.7</b>	<b>8.4</b>

Source: American Community Survey 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table S2407 Industry by Class of Worker for the Civilian Employed Population 16 Years and over

Table 1.7 Western Workforce Development Area Industry Employment Projections 2020-2030

Industry	Base Year	Projected	Numeric Change	Percent Change
	Employment	Year Employment		
Total All Industries	154,728	164,757	10,029	6.48
Self Employed and Unpaid Family Workers, All Jobs	10,611	10,159	-452	-4.26
Goods Producing	32,324	33,741	1,417	4.38
Natural Resources and Mining	5,842	5,774	-68	-1.16
Construction	4,941	5,409	468	9.47
Manufacturing	21,541	22,558	1,017	4.72
Services Providing	111,793	120,857	9,064	8.11
Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	29,226	31,312	2,086	7.14
Information	1,112	1,304	192	17.27
Financial Activities	6,097	6,923	826	13.55
Professional and Business Services	8,806	9,373	567	6.44
Education and Health Services	36,241	37,675	1,434	3.96
Leisure and Hospitality	11,215	13,126	1,911	17.04
Other Services (except Government)	6,558	7,749	1,191	18.16
Government	12,538	13,395	857	6.84
Unclassified	10,611	10,159	-452	-4.26

Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Industry Employment Projections

The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development projects a 6.48% increase in all industries within the Western workforce area from 2020 - 2030. The Western workforce area includes the following counties: Buffalo, Crawford, Jackson, Juneau, La Crosse, Monroe, Trempealeau, and Vernon. Out of the growing industries, “Other Services (except Government)”, “Information”, and “Leisure and Hospitality” have the most projected growth in employment. “Self Employed and Unpaid Family Workers, All Jobs”, “Unclassified”, and “Natural Resources and Mining” all have a projected decrease in employment rates.

Table 1.8 Percentage of Population below Poverty Level in the Past 12 Months

Vernon County		Wisconsin	
2012	2021	2012	2021
15.2	14.9	12.5	10.7

Source: American Community Survey 2012 and 2021 5-Year Estimates, S1701 Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months

Table 1.9 Means of Commuting to Work

	2010		2020	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Car, truck, or van (drove alone)	10,213	74.8	10,541	77.3
Car, truck, or van (carpooled)	1,323	9.7	1,023	7.5
Public transportation (excluding taxicab)	32	0.2	58	0.4
Walked	622	4.6	465	3.4
Taxicab, motorcycle, bicycle, or other means	276	2.0	441	3.2
Worked from home	1,180	8.6	1,109	8.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,646</b>		<b>13,637</b>	

Source: American Community Survey 2020 5-Year Estimates, B08101 Means of Transportation to Work by Age

Transportation trends slightly changed from 2010 to 2020. More Vernon County residents choose to drive themselves alone while commuting to work than carpool.

Table 1.10 Industry Projections for Western Workforce Development Area

Industry	Projected Percent Change from 2016 to 2026
Goods Producing	2.7
Natural Resources and Mining	7.9
Construction	10.3
Manufacturing	-0.1
Services Providing	8.4
Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	9.2
Information	-11.7
Financial Activities	12.8
Professional and Business Services	13.1
Education and Health Services	8.7
Leisure and Hospitality	9.8
Other Services (except government)	6.1
Government	2.5
Self-Employed	8.9

Source: Western Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, WIOA Local Plan 2020-2023, Table 1

Table 1.11 Industry Projections for Western Workforce Development Area

Industry	Projected Percent Change from 2016 to 2026
Goods Producing	2.7
Natural Resources and Mining	7.9
Construction	10.3
Manufacturing	-0.1
Services Providing	8.4
Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	9.2
Information	-11.7
Financial Activities	12.8
Professional and Business Services	13.1
Education and Health Services	8.7
Leisure and Hospitality	9.8
Other Services (except government)	6.1
Government	2.5
Self-Employed	8.9

Source: Western Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, WIOA Local Plan 2020-2023, Table 1

The Western Wisconsin Workforce Development Board projects that *Professional and Business Services* and *Financial Activities* as having the greatest projected percent change increase from 2016 to 2026.

Table 1.11 Unemployment by Age

Age	# Unemployed	% Unemployed
< 22	6	2.05
22-24	10	3.42
25-34	55	18.84
35-44	70	23.97
45-54	60	20.55
55-59	33	11.30
60-64	30	10.27
65+	28	9.59

Source: Lightcast™, April 2023



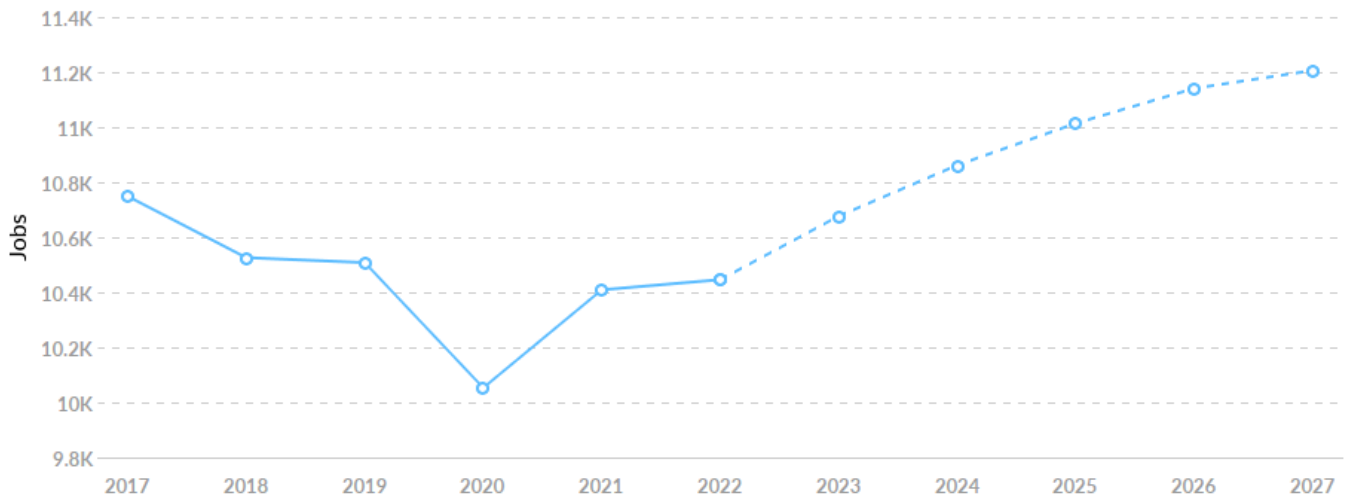


Figure 1.3 Job Trends

Source: Lightcast™ 2022

From 2017 to 2022, jobs in Vernon County declined by 2.8%. This fell far below the national job growth rate of 3.8% in the same time period (Figure 1.3).

Table 1.12 Industry Growth for Vernon County (2017-2022)

Industry	2017 Jobs	2022 Jobs	% Change from 2017 - 2022
Construction	588	731	24.3
Manufacturing	1,007	1,150	14.2
Retail Trade	1,192	1,305	9.5
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	64	94	46.9
Finance and Insurance	323	345	6.8
Accommodation and Food Services	747	766	2.5
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	62	72	16.1

Source: Lightcast™ (2022) Top Growing Industries

Table 1.13 Job Growth by Zip Code

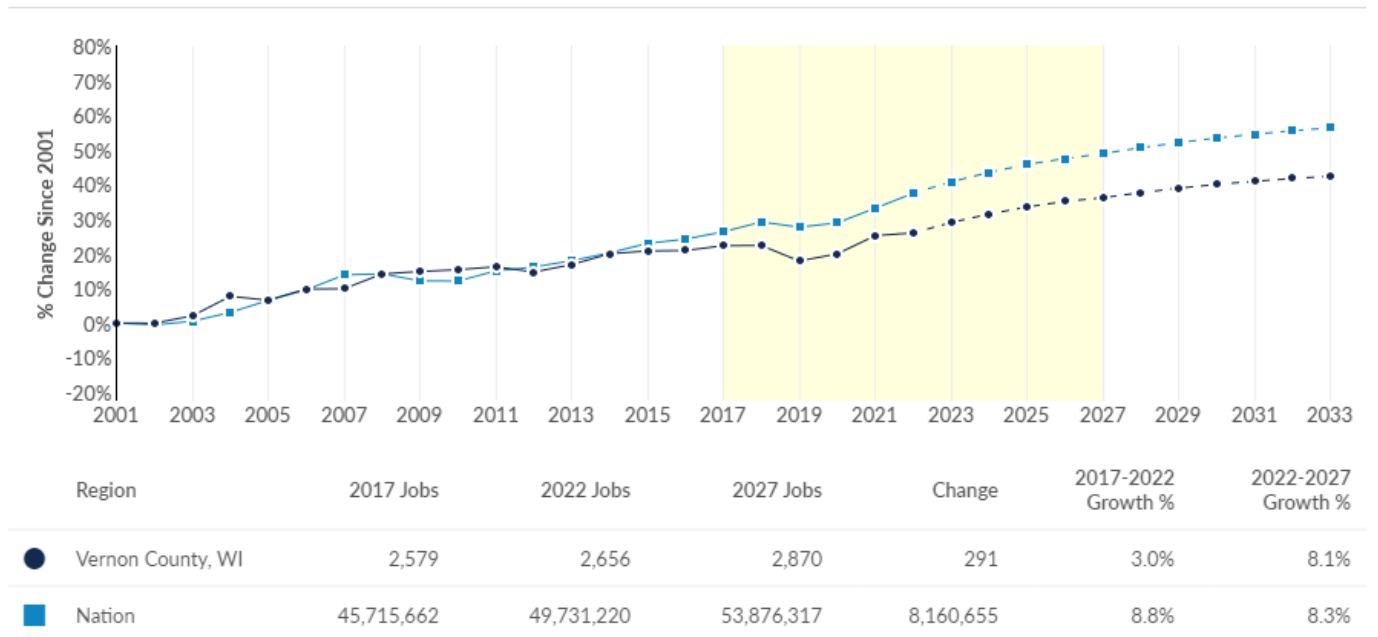
ZIP	ZIP Name	2017 Jobs	2022 Jobs	2017-2022 % Change	Avg. Hourly Earnings (USD)
54665	Viroqua	1,094	1,130	3	33.43
54667	Westby	387	437	13	34.82
54634	Hillsboro	331	355	7	41.18
54651	Ontario	215	80	-63	29.01
54623	Coon Valley	114	127	11	31.87
54658	Stoddard	113	147	30	35.17
54639	La Farge	82	134	63	33.69
54652	Readstown	66	78	18	32.17
54632	Genoa	64	59	-8	27.66
54621	Chaseburg	62	66	6	36.81
54624	De Soto	52	44	-15	35.52

Source: Lightcast™ (2022) - Workforce Availability Report

Ontario Wisconsin, located within Vernon County, has seen an extreme reduction in job growth with a -63% percent change from 2017 to 2022; alternatively, La Farge has seen a 63% increase in job growth from 2017 to 2022.

Hillsboro appears to have the highest average hourly earnings at \$41.18 an hour while Genoa has the lowest average wage at \$27.66 an hour.

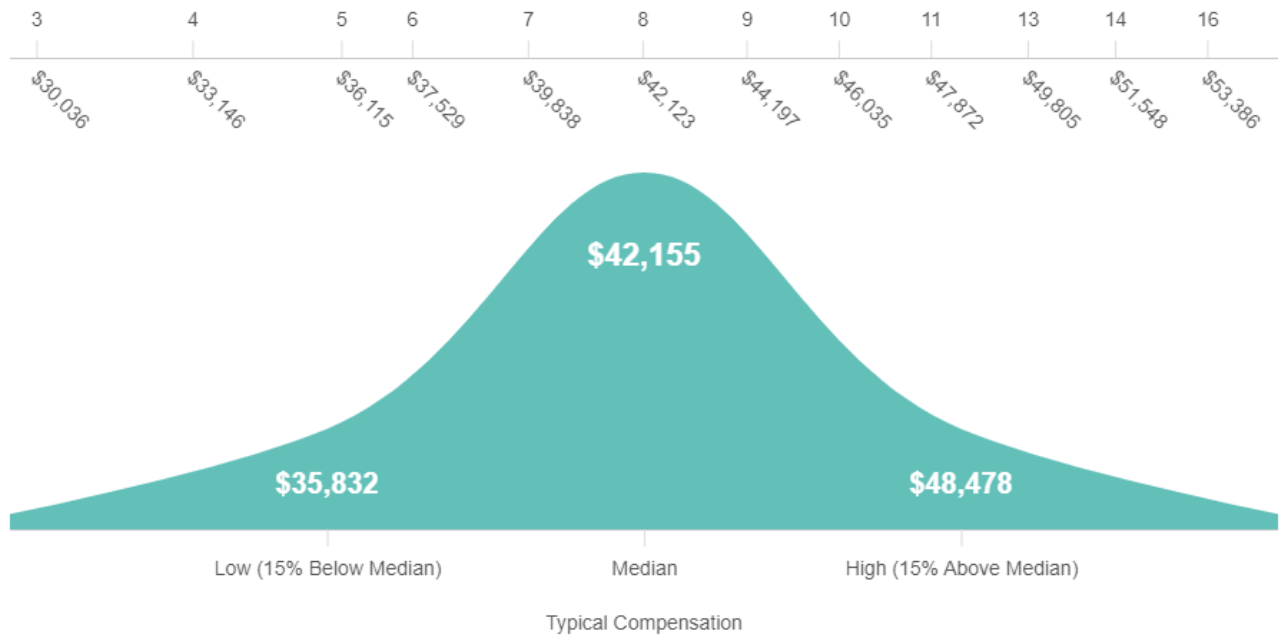
Regional Trends



Source: Lightcast™ 1022

Figure 1.4 Regional Job Trends

When comparing Vernon County’s job growth to the national rate, it is seen that Vernon County’s job growth rate has been straying farther from the national trend.



\*Only the median compensation for each cohort is plotted. In reality, compensation for a cohort will range above and below the plotted point.

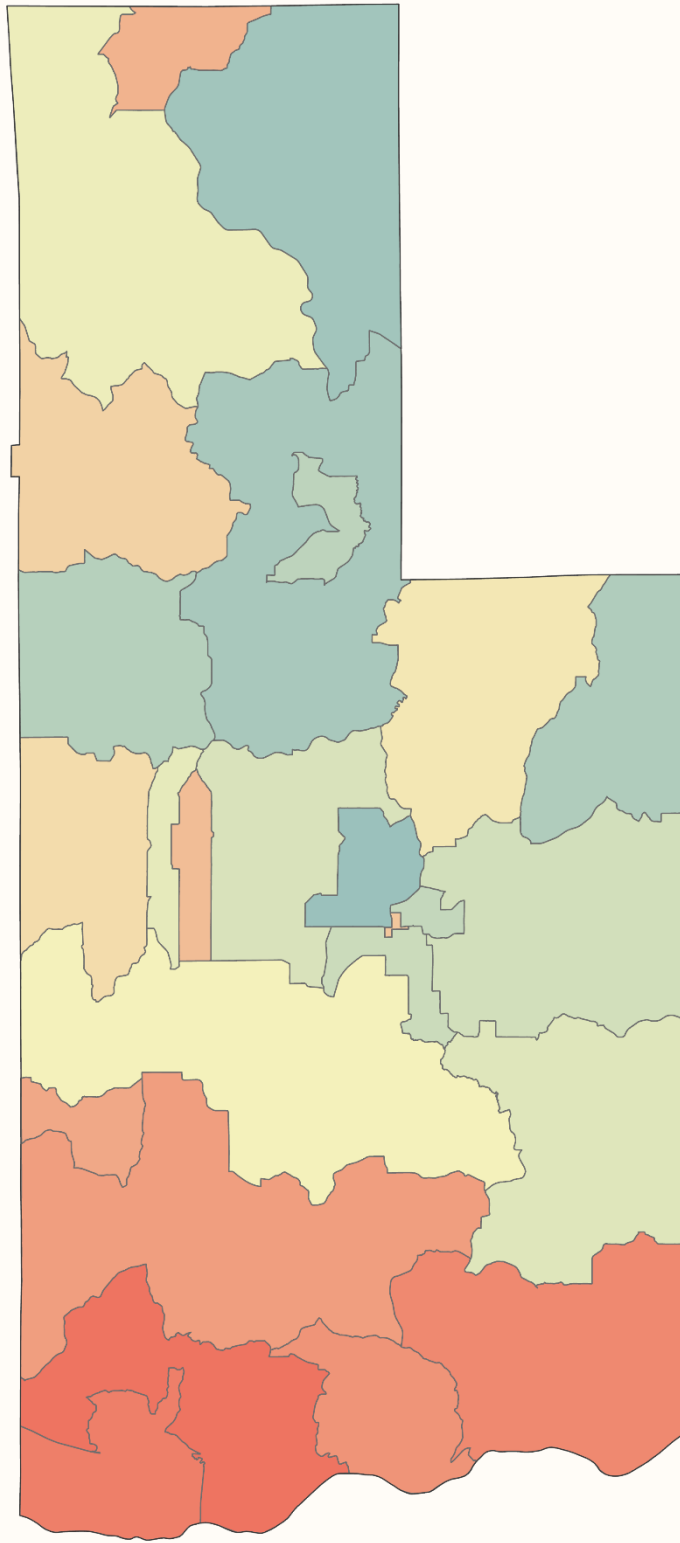
Region	10th Pct.	25th Pct.	50th Pct.	75th Pct.	90th Pct.
Vernon County, WI	\$23,458	\$27,638	\$42,155	\$64,734	\$90,151
Nation	\$25,881	\$34,374	\$57,251	\$91,127	\$129,266
COL Adjusted Vernon County, WI	\$24,184	\$28,493	\$43,459	\$66,736	\$92,939

Figure 1.5 Vernon County Compensation by Years of Experience

Source: Lightcast™ - Compensation Analysis 2022

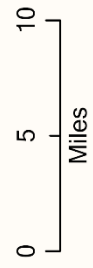
Compensation adjusted for Cost of Living in Vernon County is significantly lower than the national average according to Lightcast’s compensation analysis report.

# Percent of Vernon County Residents that Work out of County by Census Block Group (2020) Vernon County, WI



Percent of Out of County Commuters

Greater Fewer



Source: US Census, Table B08007 (2020) Vernon County Block Groups



## Housing

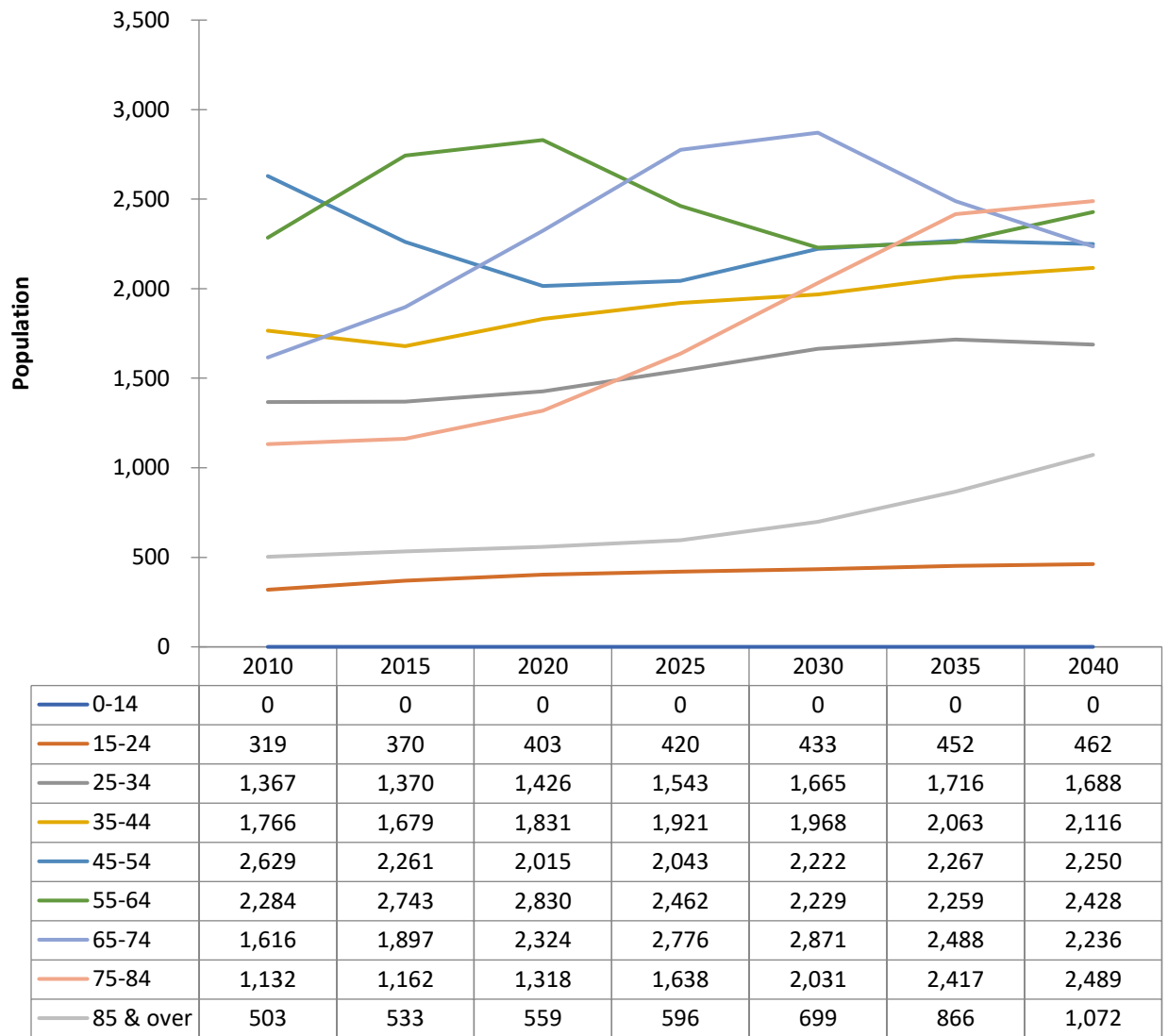


Figure 1.6 Homeownership Projections by Age Group

Source: Department of Administration, Demographic Services Center, Household Projections, by County, by Age Group, 2010 - 2040

Projections for age of householder predict a gradual increase in homeownership among most age groups. Though, ages 45-54 see a decrease in ownership, mostly seen between 2010 and 2015. Ages 45 - 54 are then projected to stagnate in household ownership through 2040.

Table 1.14 Housing Unit Counts

Year	Vernon County
2000	12,416
2010	13,646
2020	14,173
% Change (2000-2010)	9.9
% Change (2010-2020)	3.9

Source: American Community Survey 2010, 2020 5-Year Estimates - Table B25001 Housing Units

Between 2000 and 2010 there was an increase of 9.9% in housing units within Vernon County. From 2010 to 2020 there was a 3.9% increase in housing units.

Table 1.15 Occupancy Status

	2010	2015	2020
Occupied	11,905	11,758	12,082
Vacant	1,741	2,003	1,731
Total	13,646	13,761	13,813

Source: American Community Survey 2010, 2020 5-Year Estimates - Table DP04 Selected Housing Characteristics

Occupied houses have seen limited changes when comparing 2010 to 2020, with a slight decline in 2015. Vacancies see a slight reduction from 2010 to 2020.

Table 1.16 Types of Housing Units

Units in Structure	Vernon County					
	2010		2015		2020	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
1, detached	10,429	76.4	10,965	79.7	11,582	81.7
1, attached	170	1.2	150	1.1	136	1.0
2 apartments	347	2.5	336	2.4	236	1.7
3 or 4 apartments	330	2.4	169	1.2	295	2.1
5 to 9 apartments	198	1.5	197	1.4	168	1.2
10 or more apartments	540	4.0	466	3.4	513	3.6
Mobile home or other type of housing	1,632	12.0	1,478	10.7	1,243	8.8
<b>Total Structures</b>	<b>13,646</b>		<b>13,761</b>		<b>14,173</b>	

Source: American Community Survey 2010, 2015, 2020 5-Year Estimates - Table DP04 Selected Housing Characteristics

As mobile homes and apartments have decreased from 2010 to 2020, single detached houses have seen about an 11% boost in development.

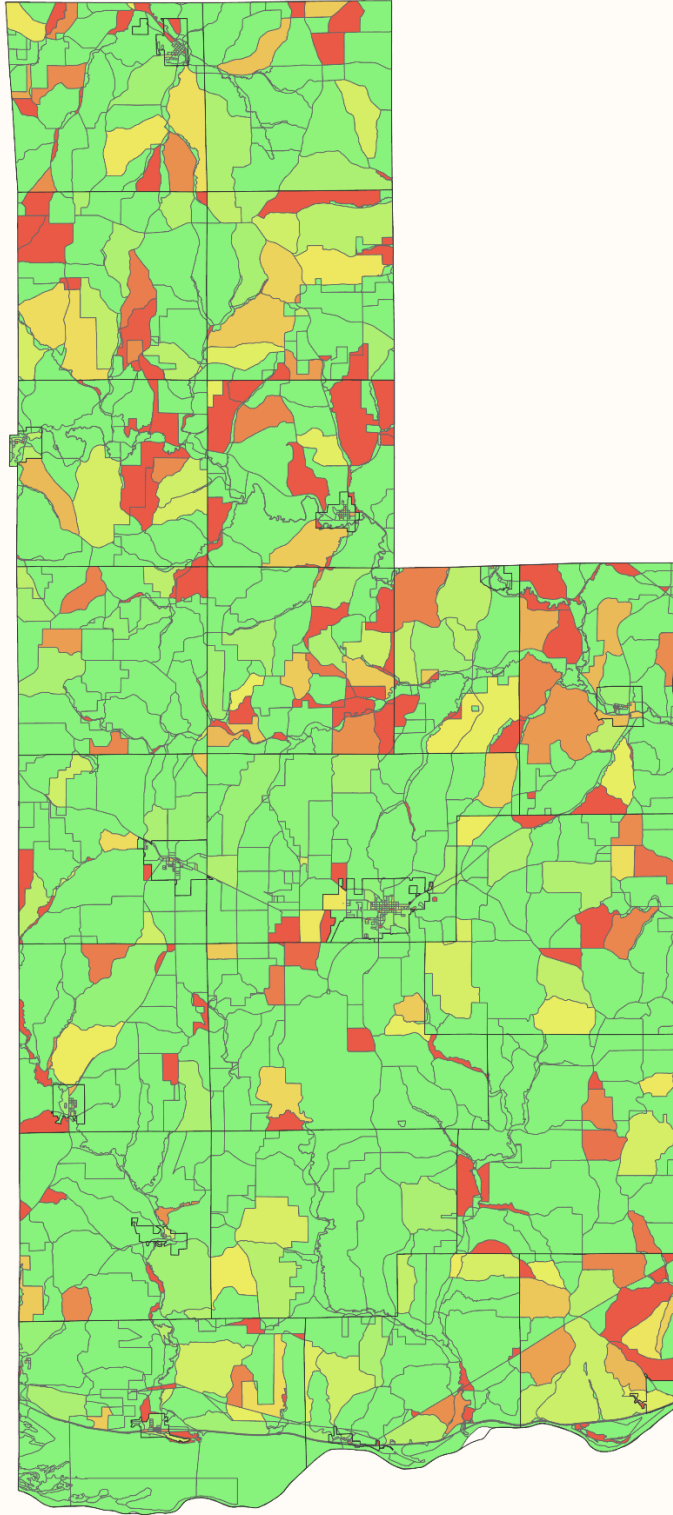
Table 1.17 Age of Householder by Percentage of Population

	2010	2015	2020
Under 35 years	16.9	14.5	14.9
35 to 44 years	17.0	14.6	14.7
45 to 54 years	22.1	20.9	15.8
55 to 64 years	17.7	21.2	22.9
65 to 74 years	12.8	14.7	17.4
75 to 84 years	9.7	10.2	9.3
85 years and over	3.7	3.9	4.9

*Source: American Community Survey 2010, 2015, 2020 5-Year Estimates - Table S2502 Demographic Characteristics for Occupied Housing Units*

Since 2010, the majority of homeowners have gotten older. The largest householder age group has progressively shifted from 45 - 54 years old in 2010, 55 - 64 years old in 2015, and 55 - 64 in 2020. Age groups under 35 and 35 - 44 have seen a significant reduction in householders since 2010.

# Percent of Vacant Housing Units by Census Block (2020) Vernon County, WI

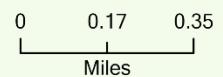
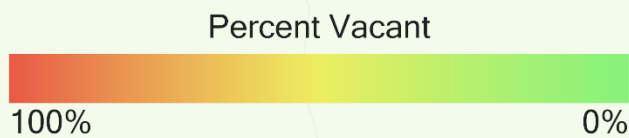
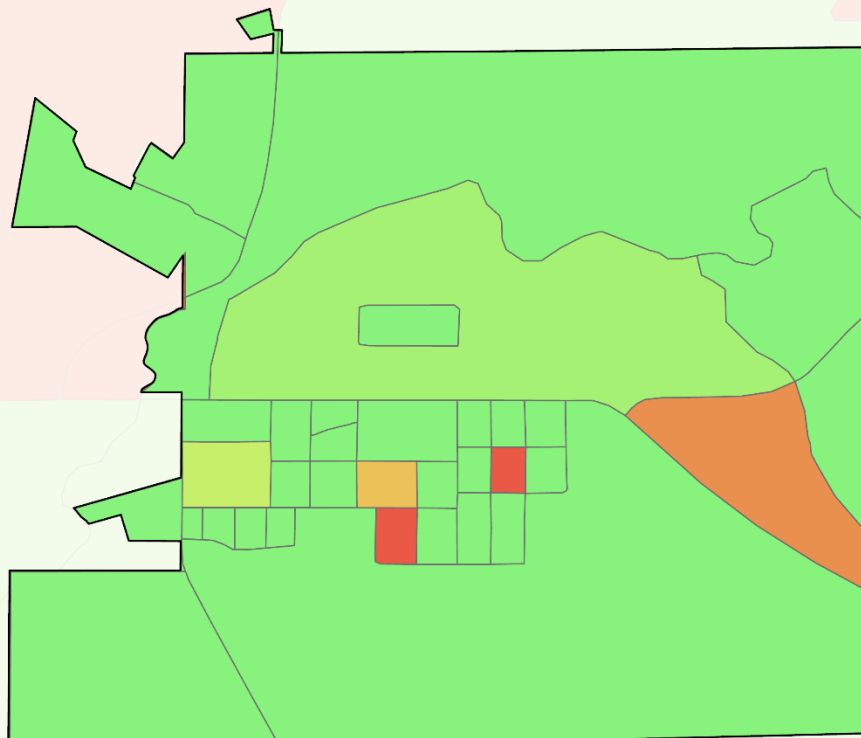


Source: US Census, Table H3 (2020) Vernon County Blocks



# Percent of Vacant Housing Units by Census Block (2020)

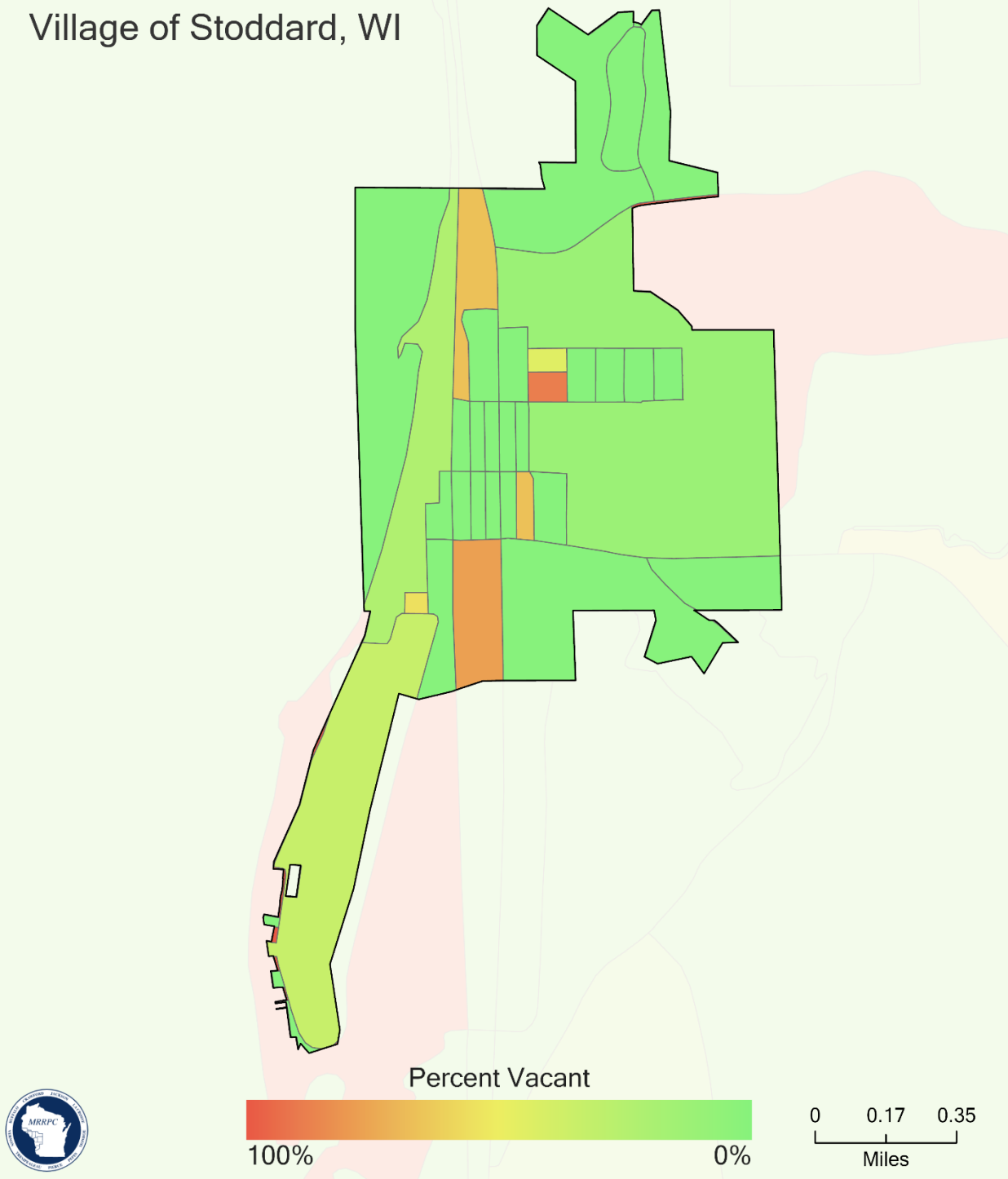
Village of Coon Valley, WI



Source: US Census, Table H3 (2020) Vernon County Blocks

# Percent of Vacant Housing Units by Census Block (2020)

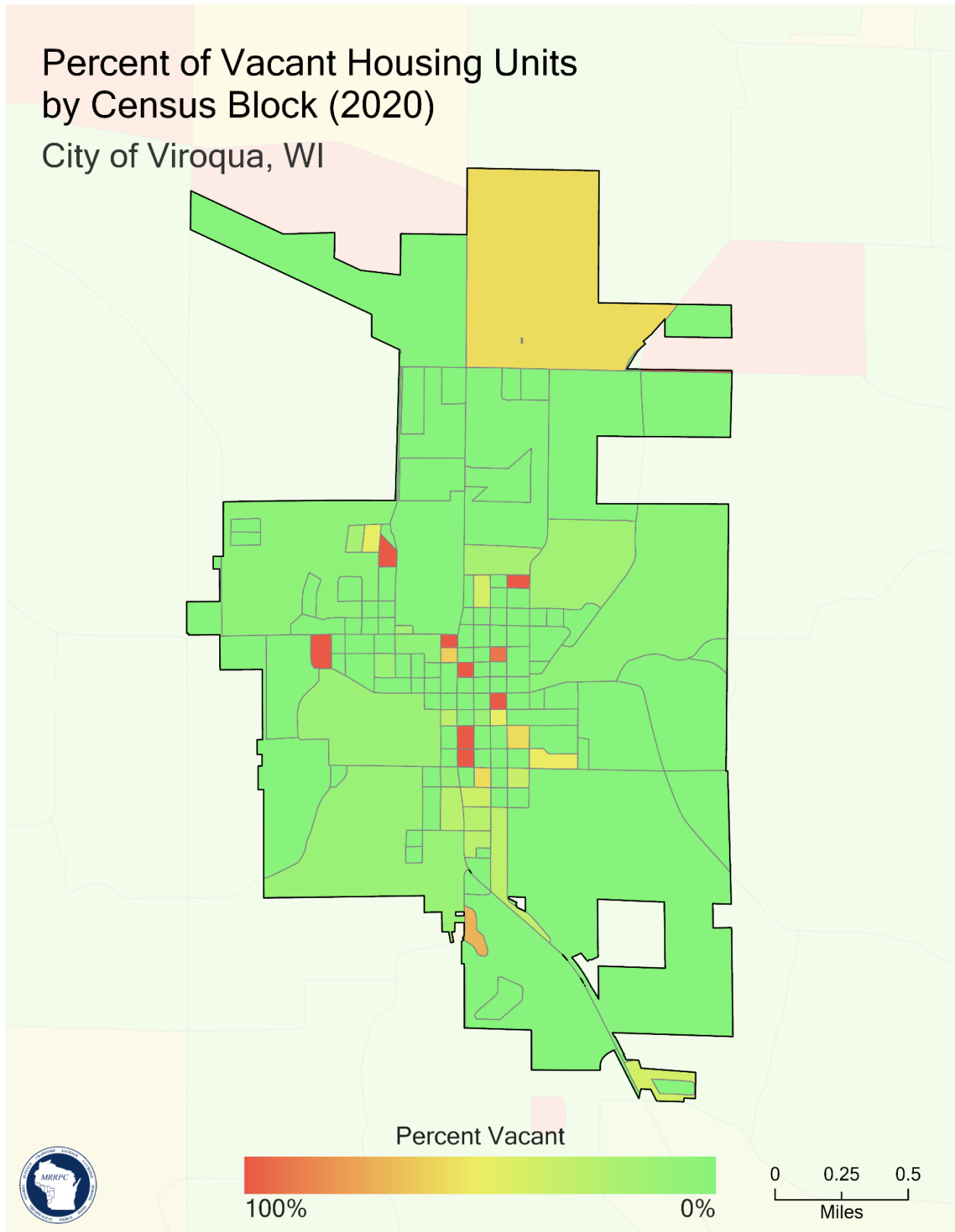
Village of Stoddard, WI



Source: US Census, Table H3 (2020) Vernon County Blocks

# Percent of Vacant Housing Units by Census Block (2020)

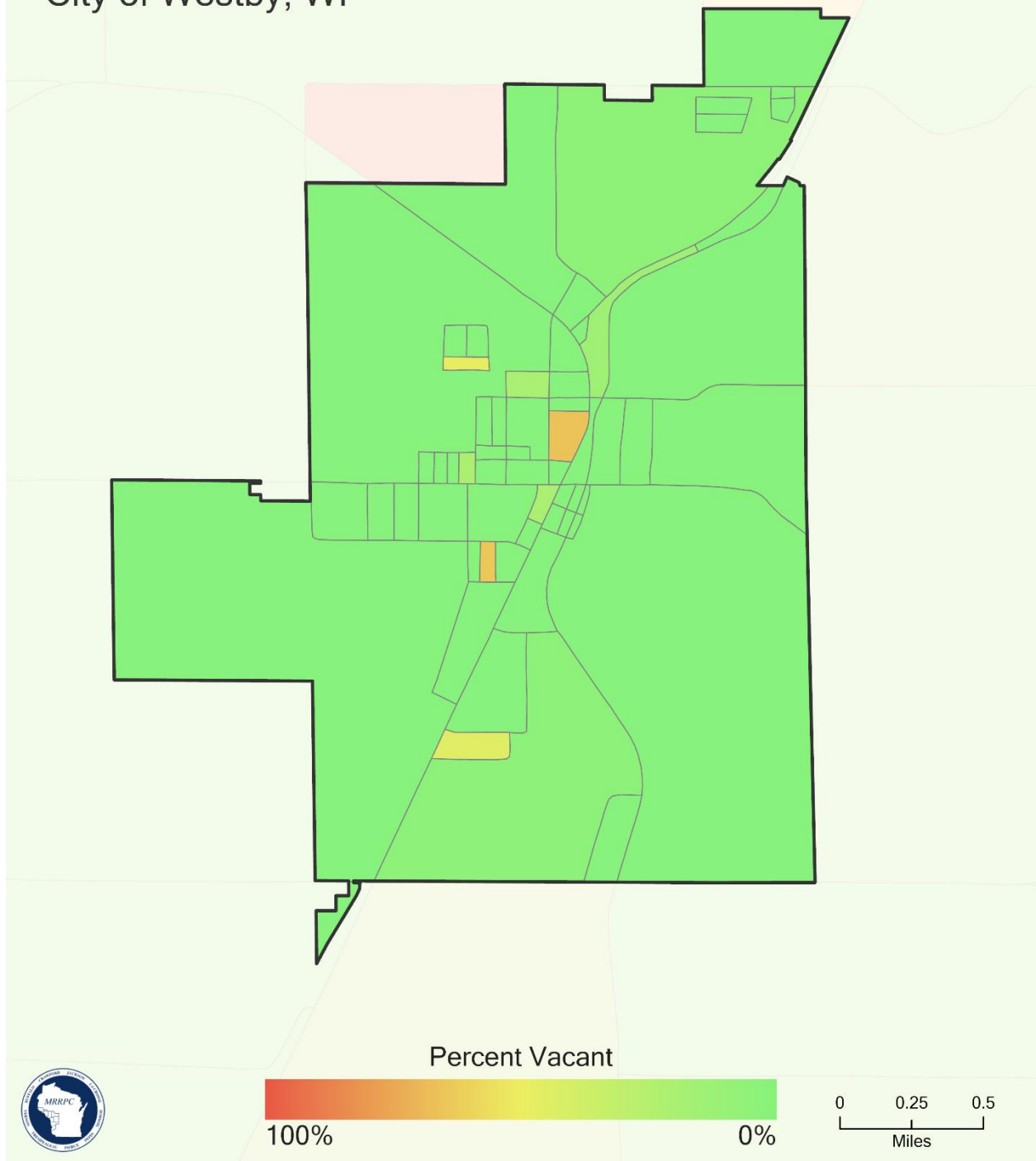
City of Viroqua, WI



Source: US Census, Table H3 (2020) Vernon County Blocks

# Percent of Vacant Housing Units by Census Block (2020)

City of Westby, WI

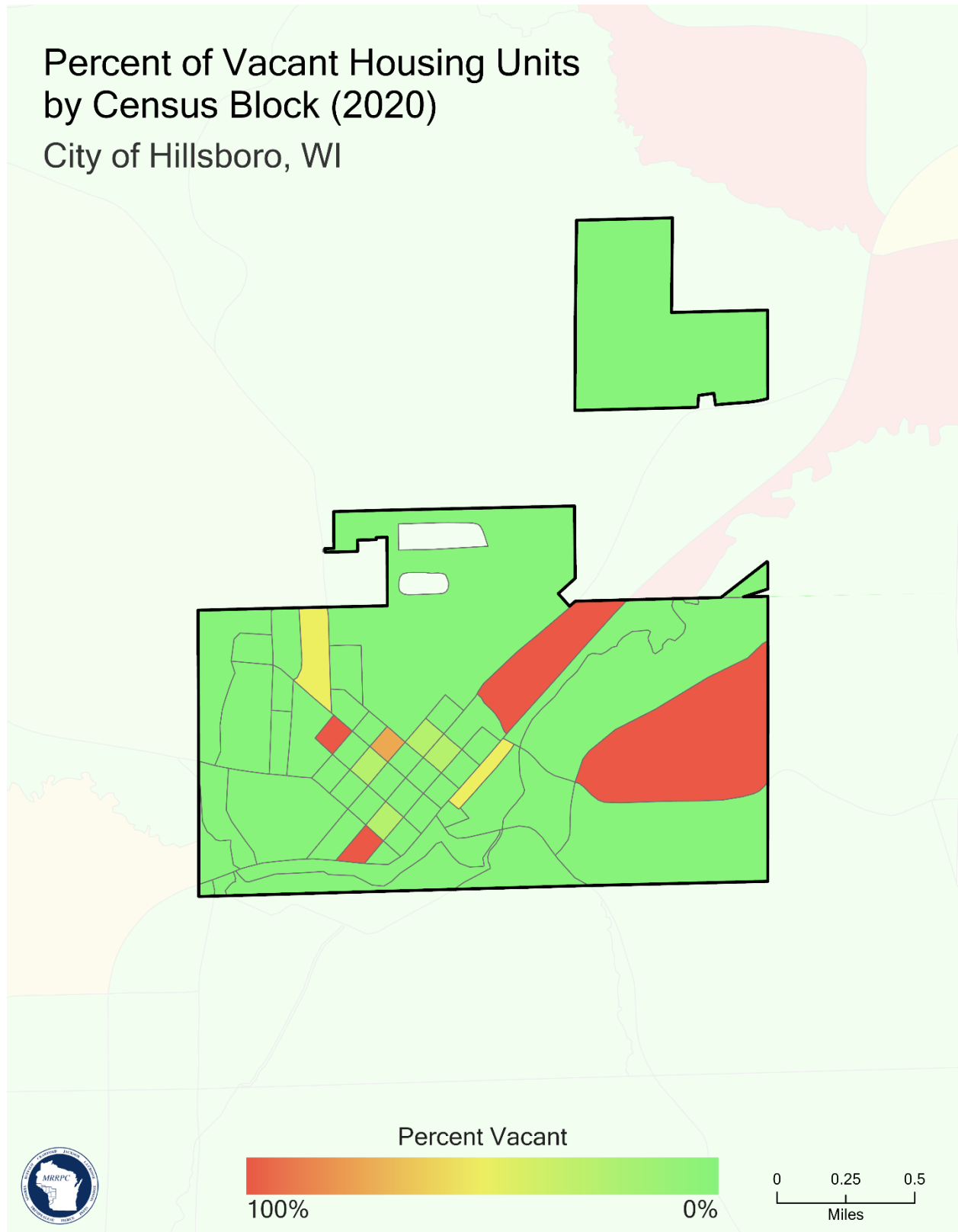


Source: US Census, Table H3 (2020) Vernon County Blocks



# Percent of Vacant Housing Units by Census Block (2020)

City of Hillsboro, WI



Source: US Census, Table H3 (2020) Vernon County Blocks

## Income

Table 1.18 Rent as a Percentage of Household Income

Percent of income	2010		2015		2020	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Less than 15.0%	423	18.9	331	16.3	389	16.1
15.0 to 19.9%	306	13.7	309	15.2	423	17.5
20.0 to 24.9%	450	20.1	211	10.4	233	9.7
25.0 to 29.9%	229	10.2	316	15.6	271	11.2
30.0 to 34.9%	132	5.9	198	9.7	234	9.7
35.0% or more	695	31.1	666	32.8	862	35.7
<b>Total units paying rent</b>	<b>2,235</b>		<b>2,031</b>		<b>2,412</b>	

Source: American Community Survey Table S2503 2010, 2015, 2020

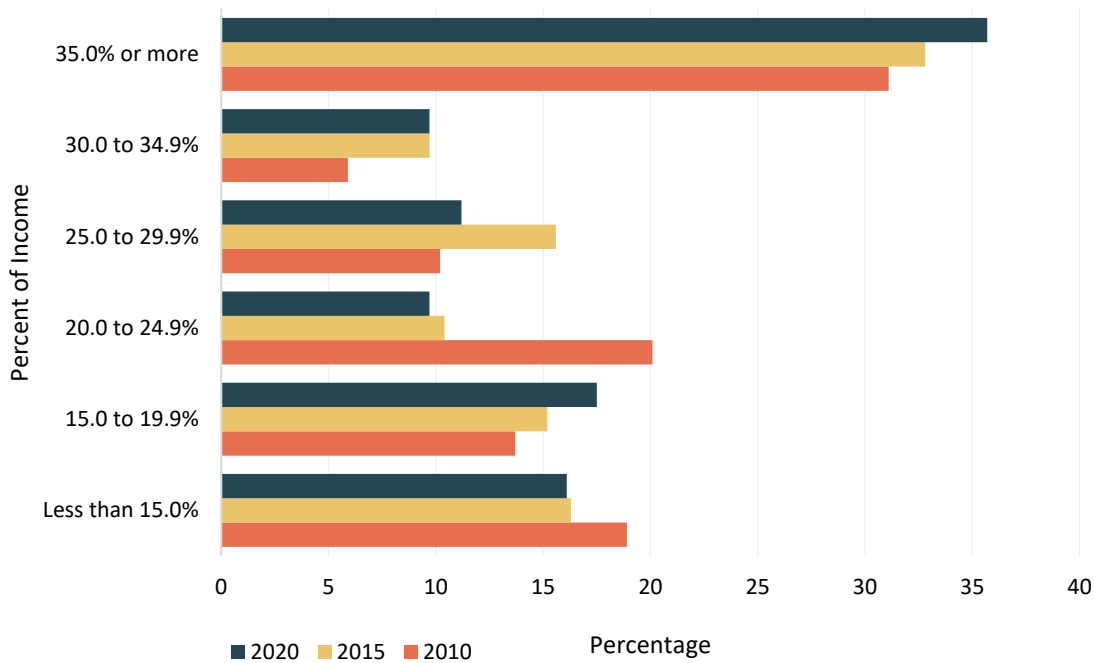


Figure 1.7 Rent as a Percentage of Household Income

Source: American Community Survey Table S2503 2010, 2015, 2020

The general trend since 2010 has been an increased rate of household income going toward rent. In 2010, residents were more likely to pay 15% or 20 – 29.9% of their rent compared to the years 2015 and 2020. Whereas the years 2015 and 2020 had higher rates of paying between 25% - 35% or more of their income on rent.

Table 1.19 Mortgage Rates

	2010		2015		2020	
	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count
Housing units with a mortgage		5,240		5,173		4,986
Less than 20.0%	33.6	1,762	38.6	1,999	46.0	2,294
20.0 to 24.9%	15.6	820	19.1	988	15.4	768
25.0 to 29.9%	12.3	644	9.5	493	11.9	594
30.0 to 34.9%	8.9	466	8.9	462	7.1	354
Greater than 35.0%	29.5	1,548	23.8	1,231	19.6	976
Housing units without a mortgage		4,090		4,056		4,288

Source: American Community Survey Table S2506 2010, 2015, 2020

Table 1.20 Income

	Percent of Households		
	2010	2015	2020
Less than \$10,000	7.0	5.7	5.9
\$10,000 to \$14,999	6.6	6.8	6.3
\$15,000 to \$24,999	12.5	12.6	11.2
\$25,000 to \$34,999	14.2	10.9	9.4
\$35,000 to \$49,999	16.6	16.0	13.6
\$50,000 to \$74,999	20.1	20.7	19.2
\$75,000 to \$99,999	12.6	13.0	13.5
\$100,000 to \$149,999	7.6	9.8	15.1
\$150,000 to \$199,999	1.5	2.3	3.2
\$200,000 or more	1.3	2.1	2.7
Median income (USD)	43,632	47,675	54,549
Mean income (USD)	54,087	60,990	67,245
Total Households	11,905	11,758	12,146

Source: American Community Survey Table S1901 2010, 2015, 2020

Table 1.21 Median and Mean Income Comparisons

Year	2010	2015	2020
Vernon County Median Income (USD)	43,632	47,675	54,549
Wisconsin Median Income (USD)	51,598	53,357	63,293
United States Median Income (USD)	51,914	53,889	64,994
Vernon County Mean Income (USD)	54,087	60,990	67,245
Wisconsin Mean Income (USD)	65,273	69,333	82,757
United States Mean Income (USD)	70,883	75,558	91,547

Source: American Community Survey Table S1901 2010, 2015, 2020

Table 1.22 Industry by Median Earnings in the Past 12 Months

	2010	2015	2020
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining:	20,128	21,004	25,625
Construction	32,457	42,125	47,917
Manufacturing	32,526	35,176	42,329
Wholesale trade	33,000	41,875	39,000
Retail trade	23,442	20,250	23,929
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities:	40,625	41,857	49,500
Information	32,422	50,031	44,464
Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing:	26,458	30,888	43,250
Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services:	27,978	28,920	31,462
Educational services, and health care and social assistance:	27,432	30,848	35,814
Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodations and food services	11,502	10,666	15,190
Other services except public administration	22,773	24,300	33,125
Public administration	39,722	43,917	52,778

Source: American Community Survey, Industry by Median Earnings in the Past 12 Months (In 2020 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars) For the Civilian Employed Population 16 Years and over, (2010, 2015, 2020) B24031

Table 1.23 Labor Force Statistics

	1990	2000	2010	2020
Labor Force	12,630	14,365	15,173	15,041
# of Labor Force Employed	12,048	13,835	13,997	14,249
Unemployment	582	530	1,176	792
Unemployment Rate (%)	4.6	3.7	7.8	5.3

Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, LAUS Report

Table 1.24 Occupational Employment and Wages, 2022 (Vernon County)

Rate Type	25th Percentile	Median	75th Percentile
Hourly Wage	\$14.36	\$19.07	\$26.80
Annual Wage/Salary	\$29,860	\$39,660	\$55,750

Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, LAUS Report



Table 1.25 Employers in Vernon County

Business	Business Type	# of Employees
Vernon Memorial Healthcare	Hospitals	250 to 499
S & S Cycle	Motorcycles & Motor Scooters-Dealers	250 to 499
Nelson Global Products Inc	Automobile Parts & Supplies-Mfrs	100 to 249
Organic Logistics LLC	Business Management Consultants	100 to 249
Westby Area School District	Schools	100 to 249
Walmart Supercenter	Department Stores	100 to 249
Viroqua Area School District	Schools	100 to 249
County Of Vernon	Transportation Authorities	100 to 249
Vernon Manor	Non-Profit Organizations	100 to 249
Couleecap	Non-Profit Organizations	100 to 249
Gundersen St Joseph's Hospital	Hospitals	100 to 249
Brookwood High School	Schools	100 to 249
Gundersen St Joseph's	Clinics	100 to 249
Norwalk-Ontario Wilton Sch Dst	School Districts	100 to 249
Viroqua Center For Orthopaedic	Clinics	100 to 249
Bethel Home & Svc Inc	Home Health Service	50 to 99
Westby Cooperative Creamery	Food Products & Manufacturers	50 to 99
Better Futures High School	Schools	50 to 99
Laurel High School	Schools	50 to 99
Varc Inc	Vocational Rehabilitation Services	50 to 99
Westby Co-Op Credit Union	Credit Unions	50 to 99
Whitehall Specialties	Cheese	50 to 99
Desoto School District	School Districts	50 to 99
Genoa Power Station	Power Plants	50 to 99
De Soto Area School District	School Districts	50 to 99
Go Macro Inc	Food Products & Manufacturers	50 to 99

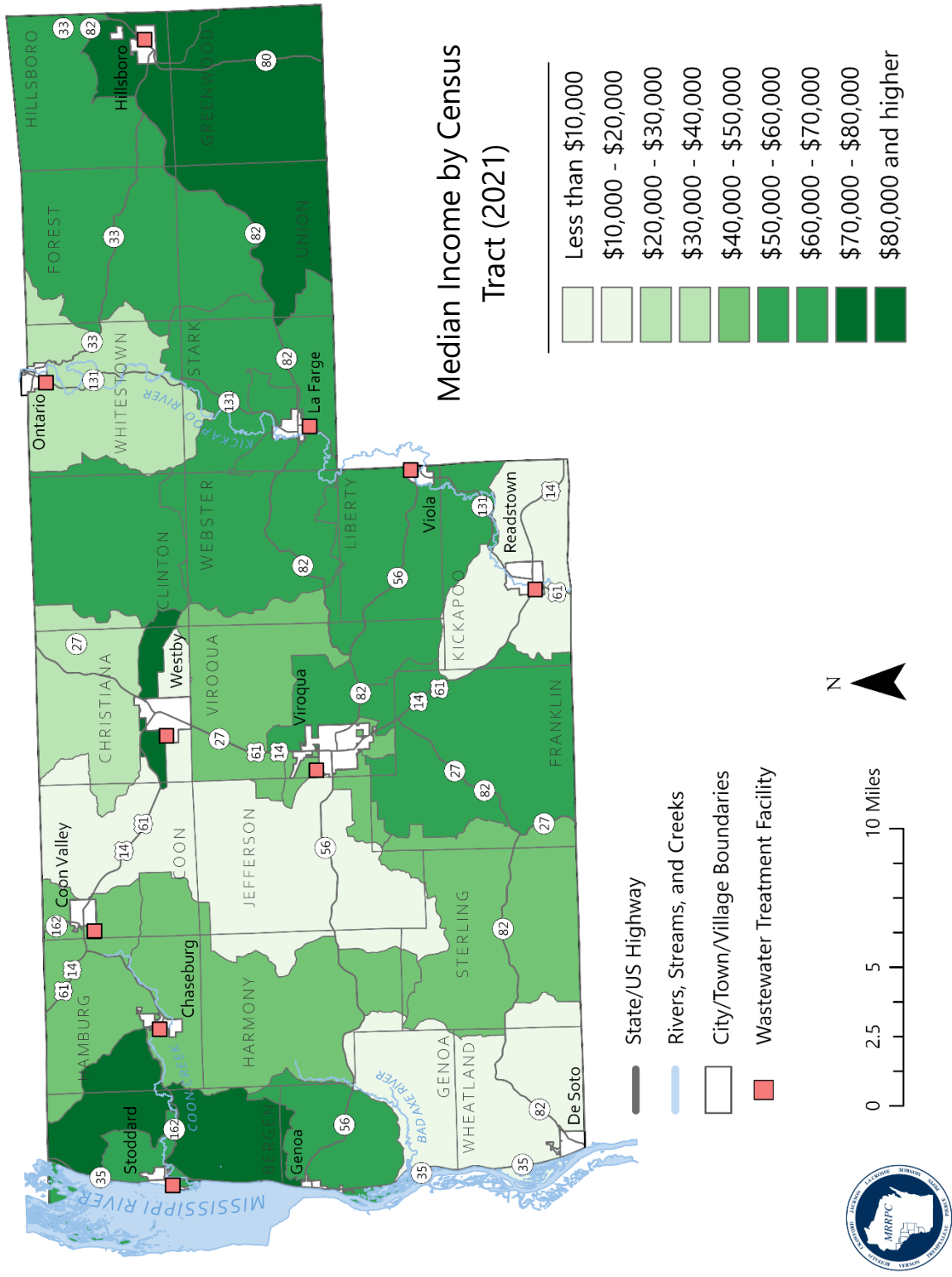
Table 1.25 Employers in Vernon County

Business	Business Type	# of Employees
Hillsboro Brewing Co	Restaurants	50 to 99
Hillsboro School District	School Districts	50 to 99
Coulee Cab Co	Taxicabs & Transportation Service	50 to 99
Midwest Hardwood Corp- Westby	Millwork (Mfrs)	50 to 99
Mc Donald's	Restaurants	50 to 99
Nelson Agri Ctr True Value	Hardware-Retail	50 to 99
De Soto Middle & High School	Schools	50 to 99
Norseland Nursing Home	Retirement Communities & Homes	50 to 99
Vernon County Sheriff Dept	Police Departments	50 to 99
Viroqua Elementary School	Schools	50 to 99
Westby Co-Op Credit Union	Credit Unions	50 to 99
Old Towne Inn Supper Club	Restaurants	50 to 99
Viroqua High School	Schools	50 to 99
ATI Forged Products	Forgings (Mfrs)	50 to 99
Gundersen Viroqua Clinic	Clinics	50 to 99
Kickapoo Area Schools	School Districts	50 to 99
Norwalk-Ontario-Wilton	Schools	50 to 99
Premier Cooperative	Agricultural Products	50 to 99
Sleepy Hollow Chev Buick GMC	Automobile Dealers-New Cars	50 to 99
Westby Cooperative Creamery	Butter Manufacturing	50 to 99

Source: Data Axle

Table 1.26 Vernon County Schools

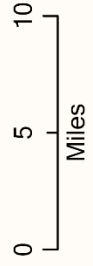
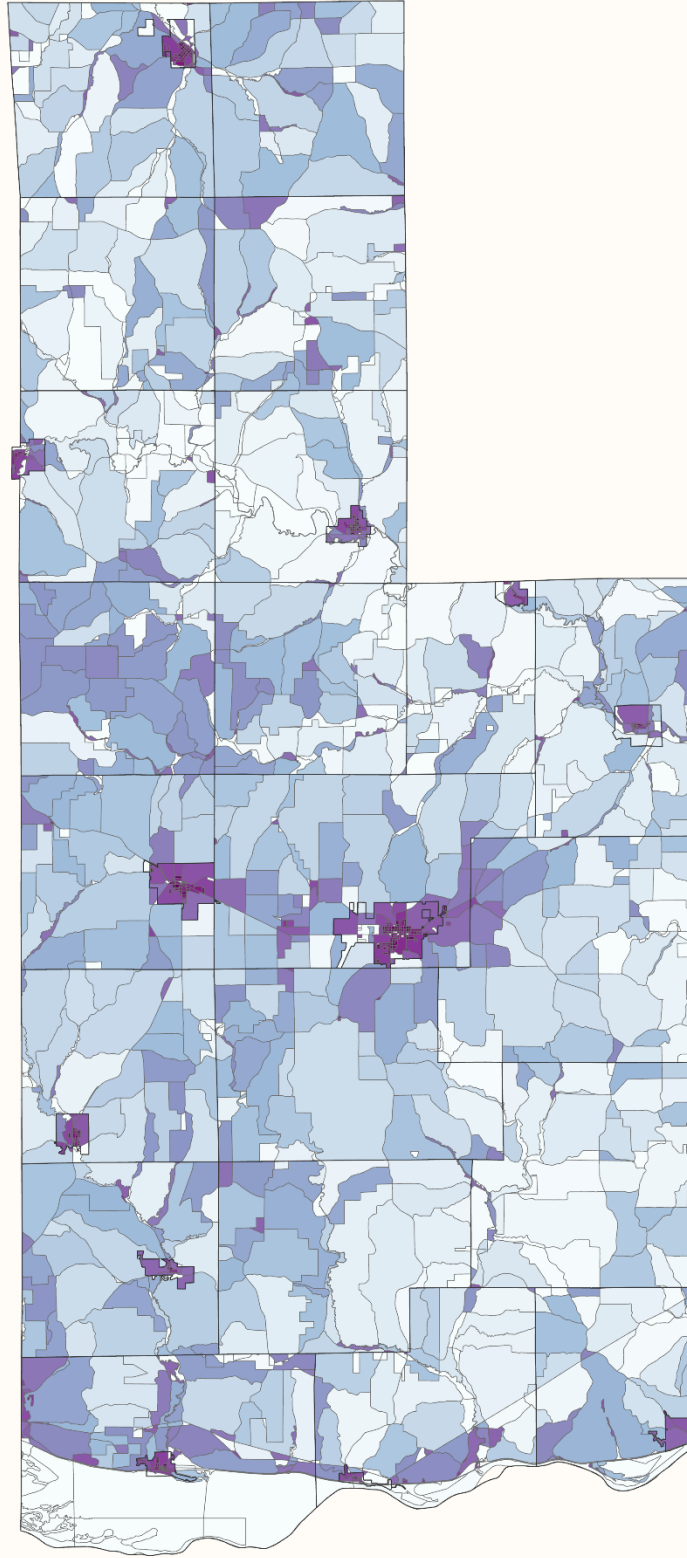
Critical Facility Name	Community	Address	Telephone
<b>Public Schools</b>			
Coon Valley Elementary	Coon Valley	300 Lien Street	(608) 452-3143
De Soto Middle School	De Soto	615 Main Street	(608) 648-0100
De Soto High School	De Soto	615 Main Street	(608) 648-0101
Hillsboro Elementary School	Hillsboro	853 Hillsborough Avenue	(608) 489-2224
Hillsboro High School	Hillsboro	777 School Road	(608) 489-2221
Kickapoo Elementary	Viola	S6520 State Highway 131	(608) 627-1494
Kickapoo High School	Viola	S6520 State Highway 131	(608) 627-1494
Kickapoo Valley Forest School	La Farge	S3661 State Highway 131	(608) 639-0565
La Farge Elementary School	La Farge	301 W Adams Street	(608) 625-2400
La Farge High School	La Farge	302 W Adams Street	(608) 625-2401
La Farge Middle School	La Farge	303 W Adams Street	(608) 625-2402
Laurel High School	Viroqua	100 Blackhawk Drive	(608) 637-1614
Prairie View Elementary School	De Soto	E3245 County Road N	(608) 648-2227
Stoddard Elementary	Stoddard	300 N Cottage Street	(608) 457-2101
Viroqua High School	Viroqua	100 Blackhawk Drive	(608) 637-3191
Viroqua Middle School	Viroqua	101 Blackhawk Drive	(608) 637-3171
Viroqua Elementary	Viroqua	115 N Education Avenue	(608) 637-7071
Westby Elementary School	Westby	122 Nelson Street	(608) 634-0500
Westby High School	Westby	206 West Avenue South	(608) 634-3101
Westby Middle School	Westby	206 West Avenue South	(608) 634-3102
<b>Private Schools</b>			
Coon Valley Christian School	Westby	E5151 Nesselte Road	(608) 799-2086
Cornerstone Christian Academy	Viroqua	S3655 Duncan Lane	(608) 634-4102
Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School	Viroqua	431 E Court Street	(608) 637-7828
St. Charles Elementary School	Genoa	707 Eagle Street	(608) 689-2646
St. Matthew's Lutheran School	Stoddard	303 N Main Street	(608) 457-2700
Youth Initiative High School	Viroqua	500 E Jefferson Street	(608) 637-6445
Viroqua Area Montessori School	Viroqua	115 N Education Avenue	(608) 637-7071



Source: American Community Survey, Table S1901 (2021)

# Population Density

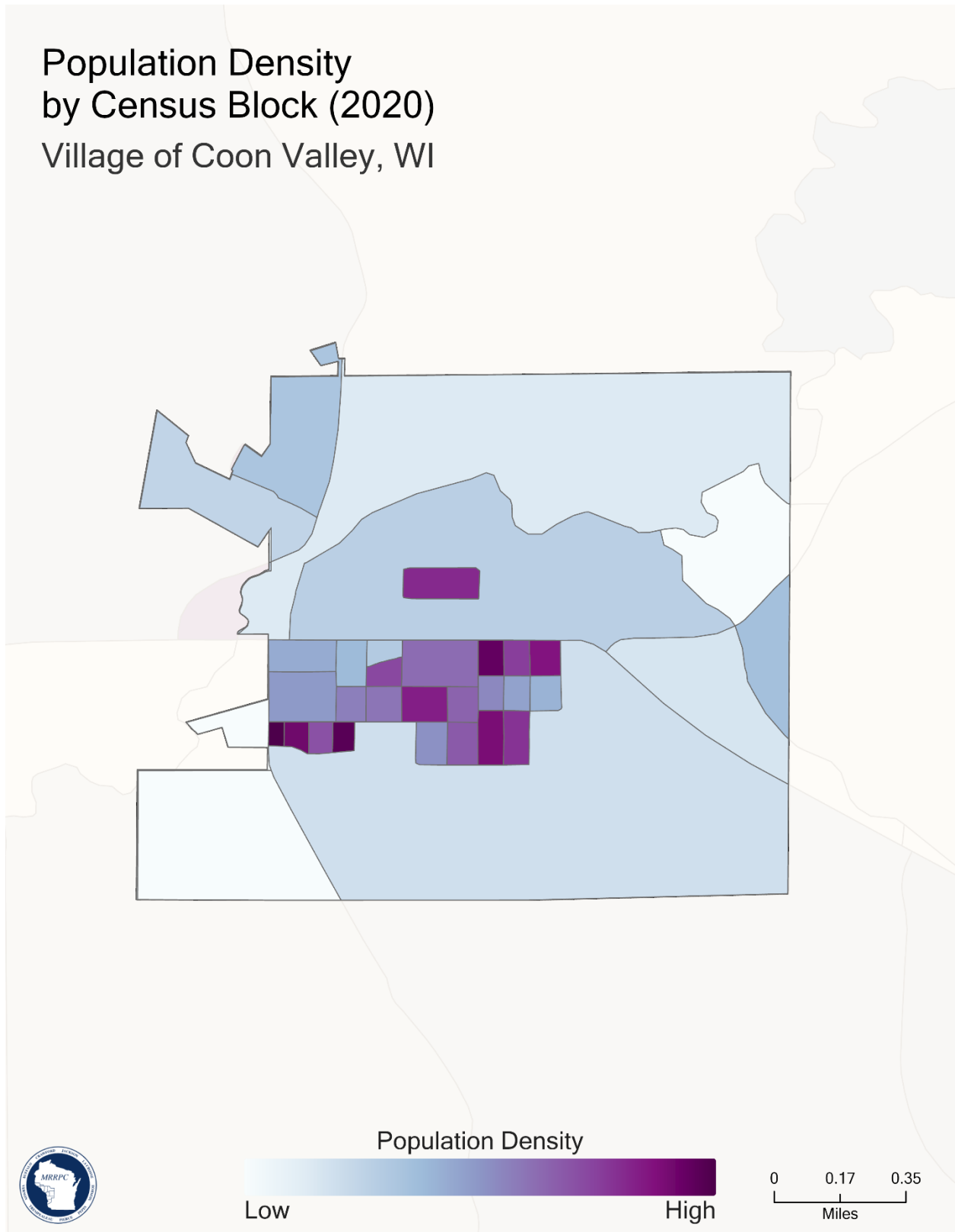
## Population Density by Census Block (2020) Vernon County, WI



Source: US Census, Table S0101 (2020) Vernon County Blocks



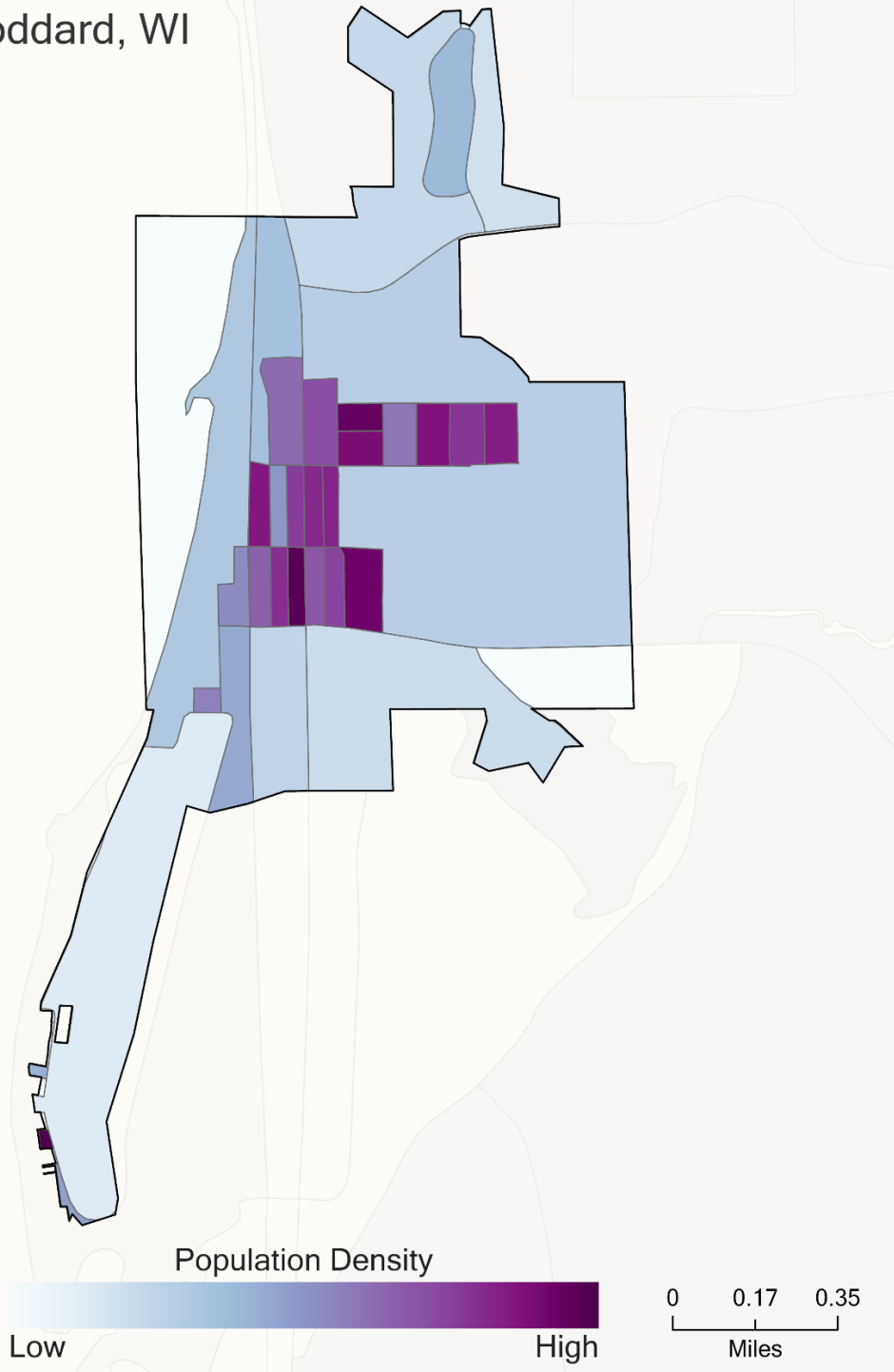
# Population Density by Census Block (2020) Village of Coon Valley, WI



Source: US Census, Table S0101 (2020) Vernon County Blocks

# Population Density by Census Block (2020)

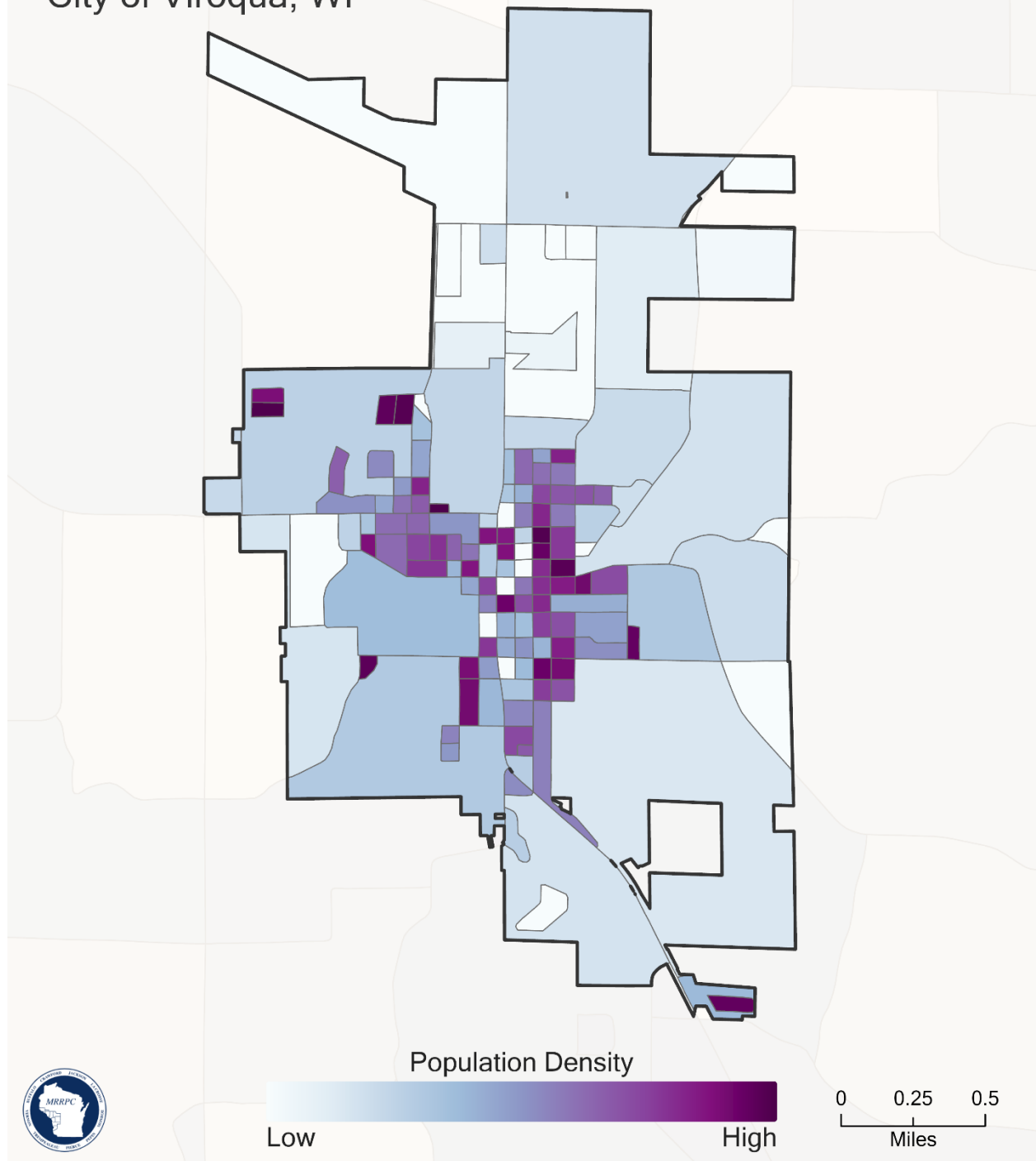
Village of Stoddard, WI



Source: US Census, Table S0101 (2020) Vernon County Blocks

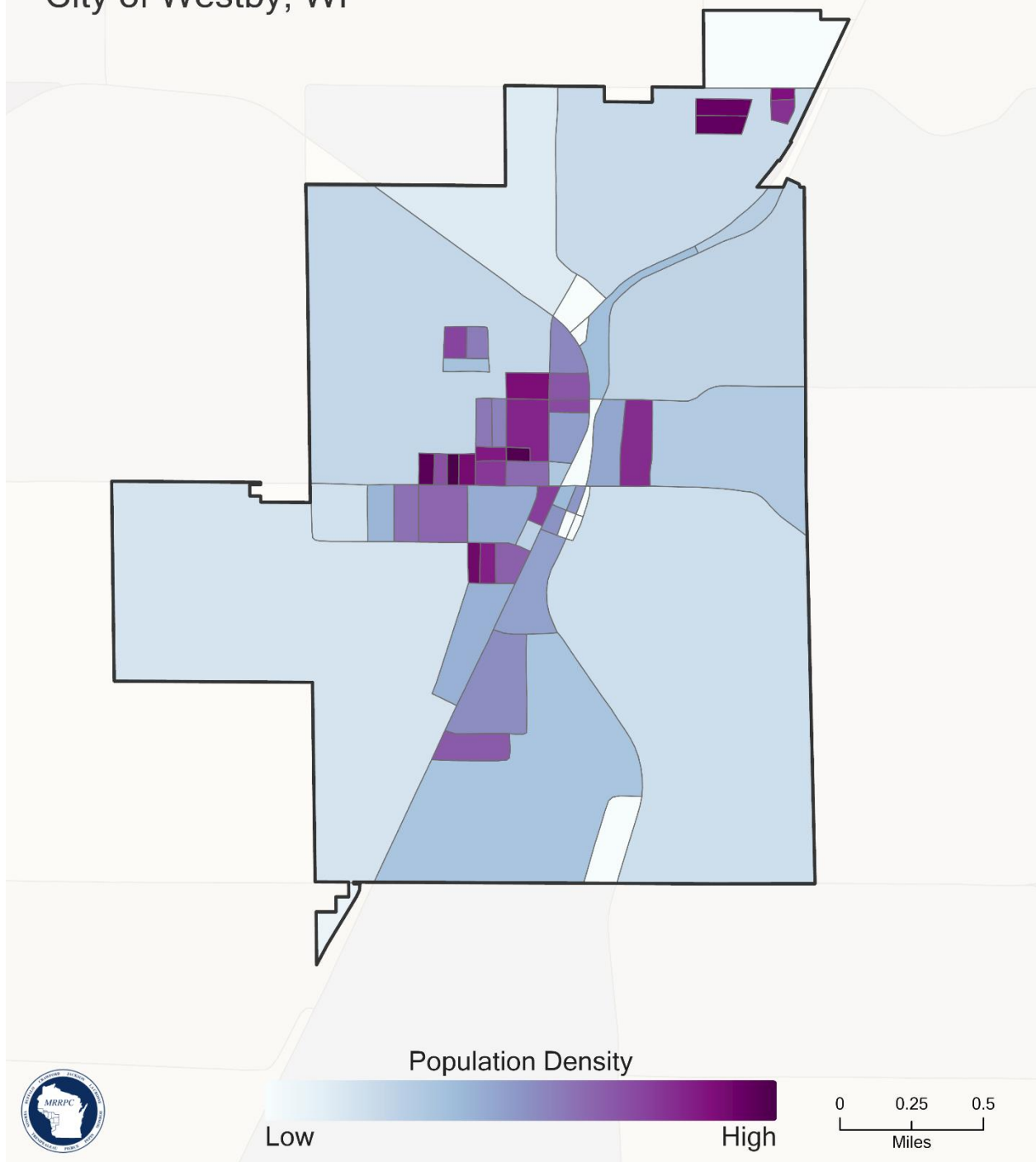
# Population Density by Census Block (2020)

City of Viroqua, WI



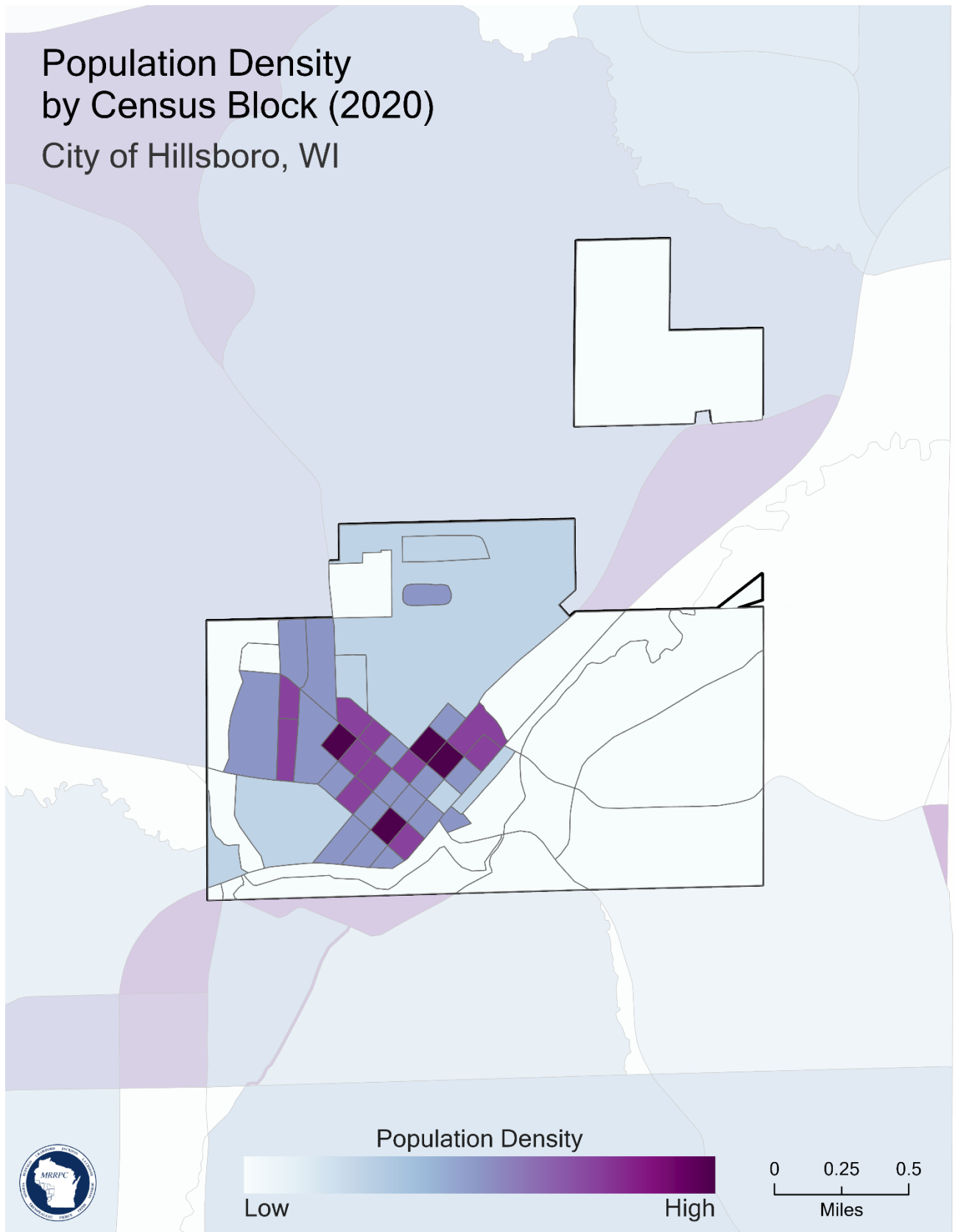
Source: US Census, Table S0101 (2020) Vernon County Blocks

# Population Density by Census Block (2020) City of Westby, WI



Source: US Census, Table S0101 (2020) Vernon County Blocks

# Population Density by Census Block (2020) City of Hillsboro, WI



Source: US Census, Table S0101 (2020) Vernon County Blocks



## Appendix

### Vernon County Economic Development Survey Summary



We were pleased to have over 100 people respond to the Vernon County Economic Development Inventory, most of the respondents lived in the city of Viroqua but a good representation from the rest of the county was also included. In addition, 14 respondents lived outside the county. Most of the respondents also worked in the city of Viroqua. But again, there was a fair distribution from the rest of the county. We also had 14 people who worked outside the county.

The survey also presented a nice mix of owner / employers, management, and staff. As well as a few self-employed individuals, some retired individuals and again, those who did not work in Vernon County.

A handful of people were considering starting a new business in Vernon County with more than 20 respondents looking at expanding an existing business. Those interested in starting a new business or expanding a business in Vernon County were most interested in the quality of life, economic support, and incentives, and finding quality employees in the county. Some specific comments addressed the fact that Viroqua was now hitting a tourism capacity to support new businesses. Another individual suggested that the government should become more informed and supportive of ecotourism and recreational tourism as an economic driver. Education was also cited as an important component of job growth.

When asked to rank businesses that would have an economic impact on the economy moving forward, tourism and agriculture were ranked highest. Followed by education, arts and culture, health care and retail. There was also some support for light industrial manufacturing, professional services, development, and banking. Eliciting more negative responses were heavy industrial manufacturing and to some degree, warehousing and distribution.

When asked what type of jobs would provide higher paying opportunities for our youth moving forward the consensus was technology, development, light manufacturing, renewable energy, and tourism / recreation.

When asked to identify things that would enhance the county's business friendly environment, things that were mentioned multiple times included: housing, technology, childcare, and better communication between government and business. There were also several mentions of organic agriculture and strong support for the current efforts of economic development and incentives currently being offered by the county.

When asked to identify issues of importance or concern the respondents clearly had strong support for affordable housing, attracting high paying skilled jobs, and a good work life balance. Participants also expressed concern with regard to the aging population of the county and a declining young adult population.

When asked about development strategies moving forward, the clear winner was providing vibrant downtown and communities, followed closely by renovating existing buildings.

The respondents were equally divided as to whether or not there were barriers toward business growth in the community. Those who felt barriers did exist seem to suggest that better communication between the county board and new businesses, as well as a clearer vision for the future moving forward, was needed.

There was also a strong support for the economic development and tourism department established by the county. Respondent suggested that this organization was best able to help new businesses and expand existing ones. They also mentioned the individual was instrumental in promoting tourism and supporting workforce development in the region. Specifically mentioned were: new retail development, advice on starting a business, RLF, CDBG, FEMA and covid grants and funding, live music, county park support, and support for area nonprofit organizations.

Moving forward, tools and resources that were identified as being potentially helpful to businesses included: government grants, employee recruitment, community development block grant funding, tax Incremental finance districts, revolving loan funds and employee training. There was also some interest in apprenticeship programs and the business incubator and commercial kitchen.

When asked to weigh in on some of the more unique ideas that have come up regarding economic development, there was extremely strong support for protecting our smaller farms and farmers, expanding our arts, music, culinary and creative educational offerings, the development of smaller and more affordable homes, providing more childcare in the region, and the growth of our conservancies and public lands. Also mentioned were an outdoor public pool and keeping the region affordable.

We were very pleased with both the number of responses and the interest in regional development shown by the respondents.

Respectfully submitted,

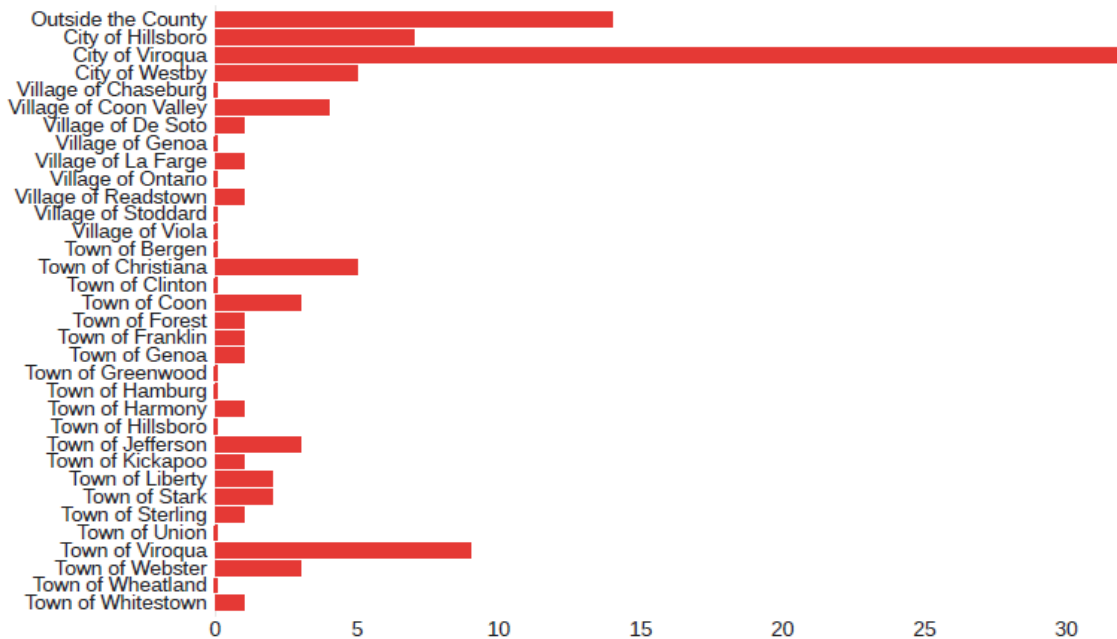
Ken Harwood  
MRRPC Planner



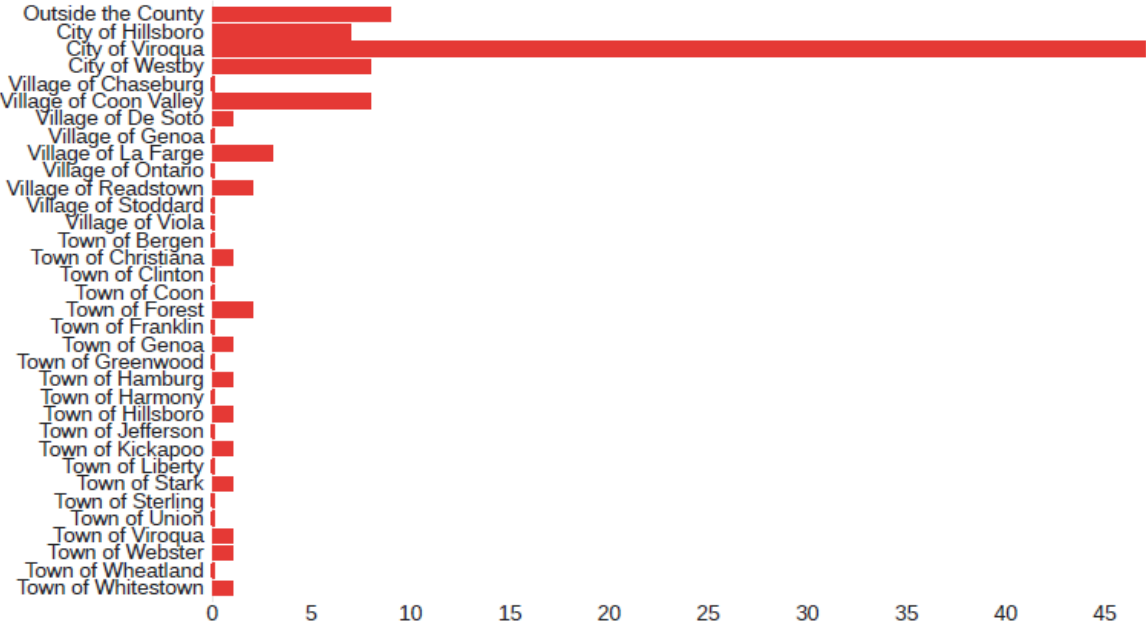
# Vernon County Economic Development Inventory

A Survey Conducted By Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission

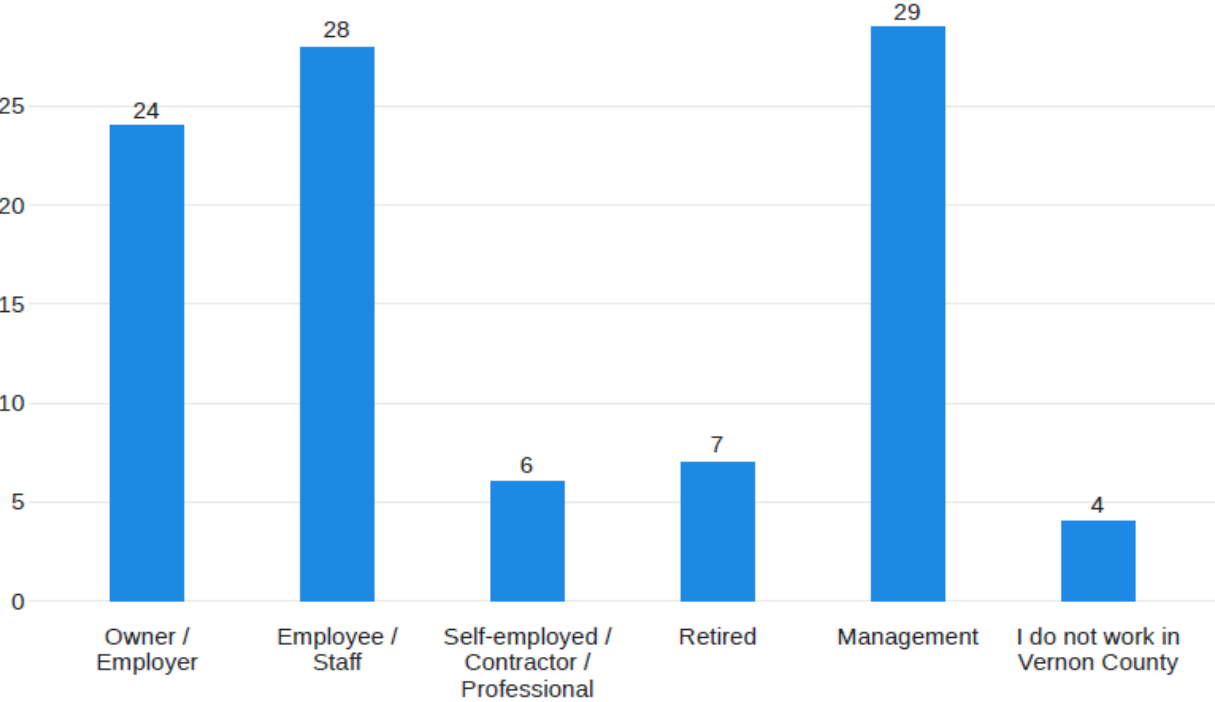
In which community of Vernon County do you currently reside?



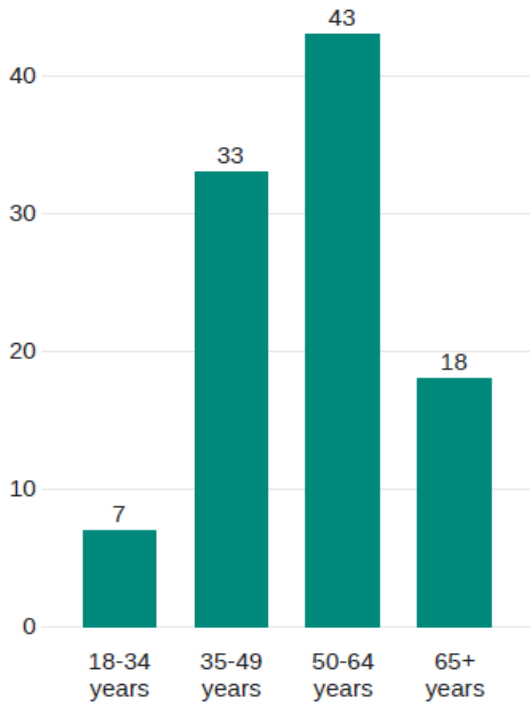
### In which community of Vernon County do you currently work?



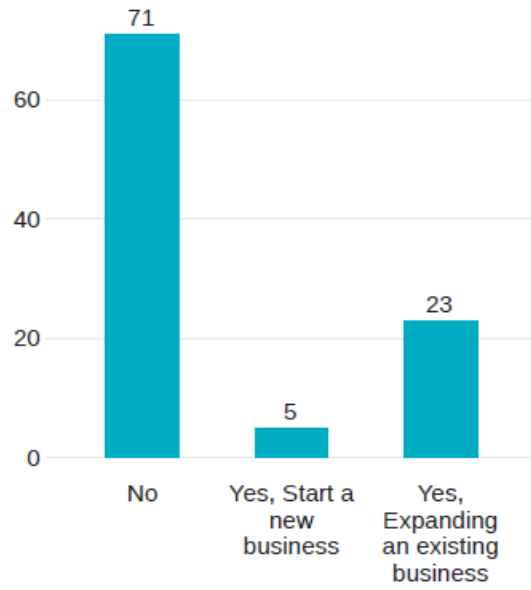
### If working in Vernon County, Current Job status:



### Age Group:

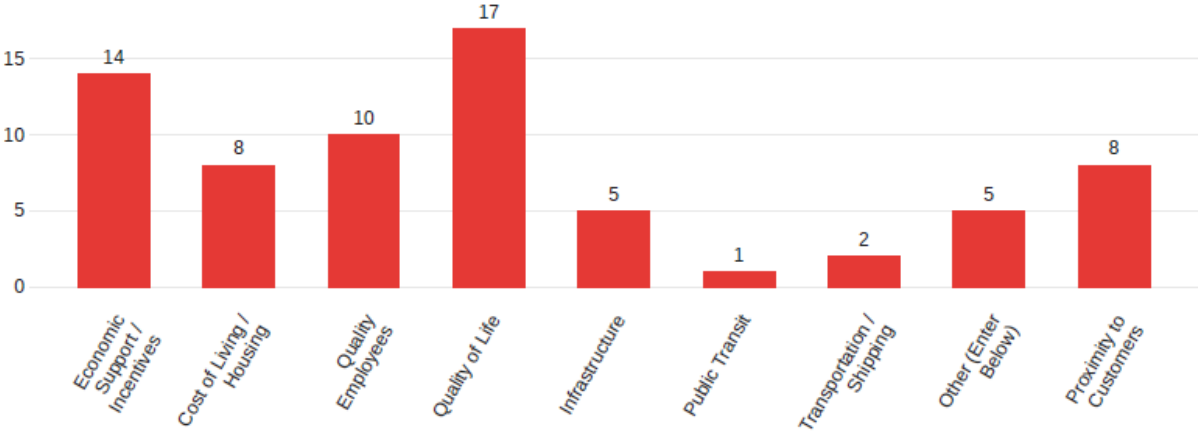


### Are you considering starting / expanding a business in Vernon County?





# What are the primary factors influencing your decision to start or expand a business within the county?



## Other Factors...

---

Not interested in starting or expanding a business.

the eclectic community and education alternatives. the homesteading ideal

I am looking to expand a current business and start a new business in the coming year. The factors checked above apply to both.

Our local government lacks the understanding that eco tourism/recreational tourism is an economic driver

Seems like Viroqua is hitting the capacity to support the business I'd like to start through increased tourism.

## Which of the following sectors would be a good fit for your community?

Field	Strong Fit for Community	Fair Fit for Community	Bad Fit for Community
Tourism	73	11	1
Leisure / Recreation / Entertainment or Hospitality	72	10	1
Agriculture	70	10	4
Education	63	17	2
Retail	61	21	2
Health / Medical / Life Services	59	21	2
Arts and Culture	58	19	4
Information / Technology	43	33	4
Light Industrial Manufacturing	43	41	2
Real Estate & Development	42	30	8
Professional Services	39	38	3
Forestry	37	34	7
Financial / Banking	30	41	7
Warehouse / Distribution	17	39	22
Heavy Industrial Manufacturing	13	26	34
Other Sectors			
Organic Industry			
Nonprofit/Community Enterprises			

# What type of new business do you believe would provide higher paid skilled jobs within the region?

--

I believe this to be a two-fold process. To draw higher paid skilled jobs, you need skilled labor to fill them. Technology, Healthcare, & Finance. Promotion of Higher Education.

Service sector, light mnfg

Make the skilled jobs more attractive to a younger generation.

Light manufacturing and real estate development

Manufacturing.

Manufacturing, Food, or products.

I do not know.

a cooperative based in wisconsin that would network and grow libraries, bookstores, publishers and consumers.

Light Industrial - IT Development/Support

Fast Food Restaurant, retail store - dollar general, etc.

Technology, health care

Technology, website development and maintenance, social media development and maintenance

Not sure

Better access to appliance repair.

Hardware store

Web based careers, skilled trade labor

Technology, alternative energy

My recommendations from the previous question.

Technology

Information Technology

## What other improvements would you suggest to enhance the county's business-friendly environment?

---

I think the recent road changes to Viroqua were a step in the wrong direction. It helped pedestrians, but reduced auto traffic flow and is now a bottleneck. The next question will be "When are we getting a by-pass?" Which may be the answer. It feels like the only way to expand is outward. There is not adequate parking to develop much further in this city.

Help existing small businesses survive by increasing visitor spending.

Give opportunities to the true small business owners.

We need more daycare's for employees as well as a wedding venue.

More housing.

I do not know.

stop tearing down all the old buildings. get a progressive city development group that can help facilitate eco-villages instead of ugly boxes.

Continue expansion of fiber - broadband initiatives. Continue to improve recreational opportunity. Emphasis on funding - low interest loans.

place for meetings, events

Providing personal support to those running businesses

Become business-friendly, recognize that more business means more money for the region to support it's needs, support planning efforts, support efforts to make business districts viable and aesthetically pleasing to customers, support growth, expand mindsets to understand the necessity of economic growth and resilience.

Investment by the county in drawing tourism revenue, diversity in retail outlets, a more balanced mix of regional or national retailers with the local businesses

Better child care options. Both business owners and their workers need access to high quality, \*dependable\* child care in order for businesses to thrive.

None

Adorable/available housing for employees, childcare

Market heavily, outside the county, Westby and Viroqua's commercial business parks.

Continue Broadband focus. Promote what we do have if it is "better than most" as the assumption is rural broadband is poor.

Telecommunications & Sustainable Energy

Invest in tourism ad economic development in a meaningful and strategic way. Invest in recreational opportunities through the land that you have access too. get creative and innovaive wih land management

more amenities like outdoor pool  
create more green spaces more trees

Which of the following Areas of Interest or Concern are important to you.

Field	Important to Me	Somewhat Important	Not Important to Me
Providing Affordable Housing	60	14	2
Attracting High-paying Skilled Jobs	58	14	2
Seeking a Work Life Balance	56	19	0
Providing Affordable Childcare	54	19	3
Declining Young Adult Population	52	20	3
Improving Infrastructure to Support Industrial/Commercial Growth	47	22	5
Sustainable Renewable Energy	45	19	11
Aging Population	44	26	2
Encouraging Green Building	41	21	12
Expanding the local tax base through non residential development	32	32	8

If you could help shape economic development in Vernon County, what land use strategies would you support?

Field	Important to Me	Somewhat Important	Not Important to Me
Promote vibrant downtown's and Communities	61	7	0
Renovate/recycle existing buildings	50	19	0
Develop sustainable commercial buildings and shopping areas	41	20	7
Promote mixed use development	33	28	6
Establish business incubators	28	27	10
Promote business/industrial parks	27	33	7
Encourage small scale development along rural corridors and crossroads	26	32	8
Encourage public transit oriented development	21	25	21
Encourage high density growth in Cities and Villages	14	27	23
Other (Enter Below)	5	0	1



## Other land use ideas...

Other (Enter Below) - Text

---

Lack of support fir tourism

Keep money local!

Invest in outdoor recreation

Outdoor recreation and eco tourism

Retraining of experienced ag folks to work in organic industry

Encourage employee-owned enterprises.

Require Amish horses to have diapers

## What regulatory or administrative barriers hinder business growth in the county?

---

Each community functions as an island. Little to no cooperation between cities to function as a county or region.

Zoning seems to be an issue for how properties can be used. Relax some of the zoning ordinances. Relax some of the building type restrictions on viroquas way north side.

State liquor license limits.

Lack of vacant properties.

Lack of affordable land to purchase.

Challenge of attracting qualified, loyal employees.

Rural community - travel challenges for others.

Lack of affordable housing.

Lack of licensed, affordable childcare.

I am not sure

Difficult for governmental boards to recognize the importance of expending funds on all the checked boxes above to create viable and successful business districts. Communities thrive when businesses thrive.

Boards that don't have big picture thinking.

Is local government progressive / efficient enough to have any current or future business feel as if they have an easy entry into growing a business. I hear of the work Prairie du Chein and wonder if we would be viewed as helping or hindering growth? Is current "press" about executive changes and perceived turmoil at the county level a hinderance that needs to be overcome?

These surveys are nice and get people excited, but at the end of the day nothing changes. The county allows the same old antiquated thoughts lead

Whoever asked this question never tried to start a business. List is endless. Ridiculous and petty.

Old views. No diversity at city level administration allowing for growth and development.

Processes to obtain grant funding for businesses and public works are the definition of impossible for small communities.

Again, due to wealthier people moving to the area and gaining ownership over multiple housing & business projects, it doesn't allow for as many of us who fall into the lower income bracket to get started/to initiate any new projects... The competition is limited due to a lack of assets for those of us who "want to contribute/start a new revenue stream" but get beat out by multi-property/multi-business owners.

The County Board seems to throw up road blocks to progress--especially the Chair and the Econ Deve sub-committee

I think the organic industry has a marketing issue. As one of the largest concentration of organic farms in the nation there is a lack of understanding that working in the organic industry is a viable career. The organic movement is experiencing a serious lack of qualified organic inspectors, Cert. Specialists, etc. Lets work to tap into the experience we have and expand their understanding, developing viable careers that keep families on the land and in our community.

I don;t really know

See above comments on providing developers with information.

County board is not friendly to any new business

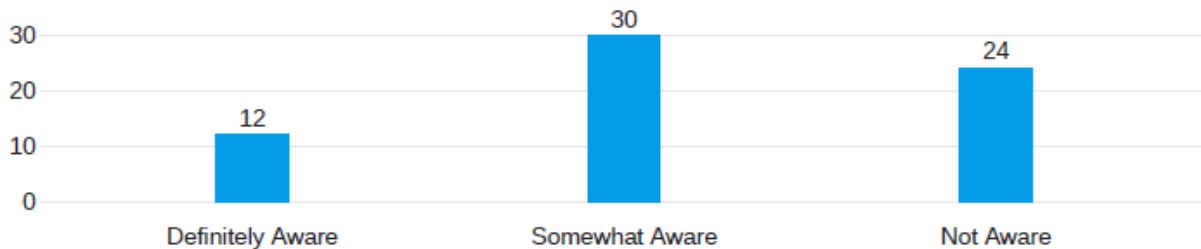
none known to me

There seems to be a lot of government oversight in everything from choosing what business someone can put in a certain place to needing signage approval. It is not a quick process but needs to be if they are going to require that much local intrusion.

## How can the Economic Development & Tourism Department and Coordinator best serve the needs of our communities? Sorted by rank...

Field	Mean
Promote the Vernon County Economic Development Loan Fund	4.96
Meet or communicate with businesses to share data and resources	4.48
Work with Communities and other Development Entities to Market and Grow the Region	4.41
Work with Schools and Business to develop Apprenticeships and Learning Opportunities	4.20
Support Workforce Development and Talent Acquisition	3.59
Promote Tourism and Visitation in the County	3.37
Help Start or Expand new business in Vernon County	2.98

## Are you aware of the economic development initiatives and programs offered by the County?



## What development tools have you used?

Early development of retail location - Viroqua

Met with the Economic Development Coordinator several times over several years and received excellent advice and help each time.

A client has inquired into the new RLF that is administered through the MRRPC.

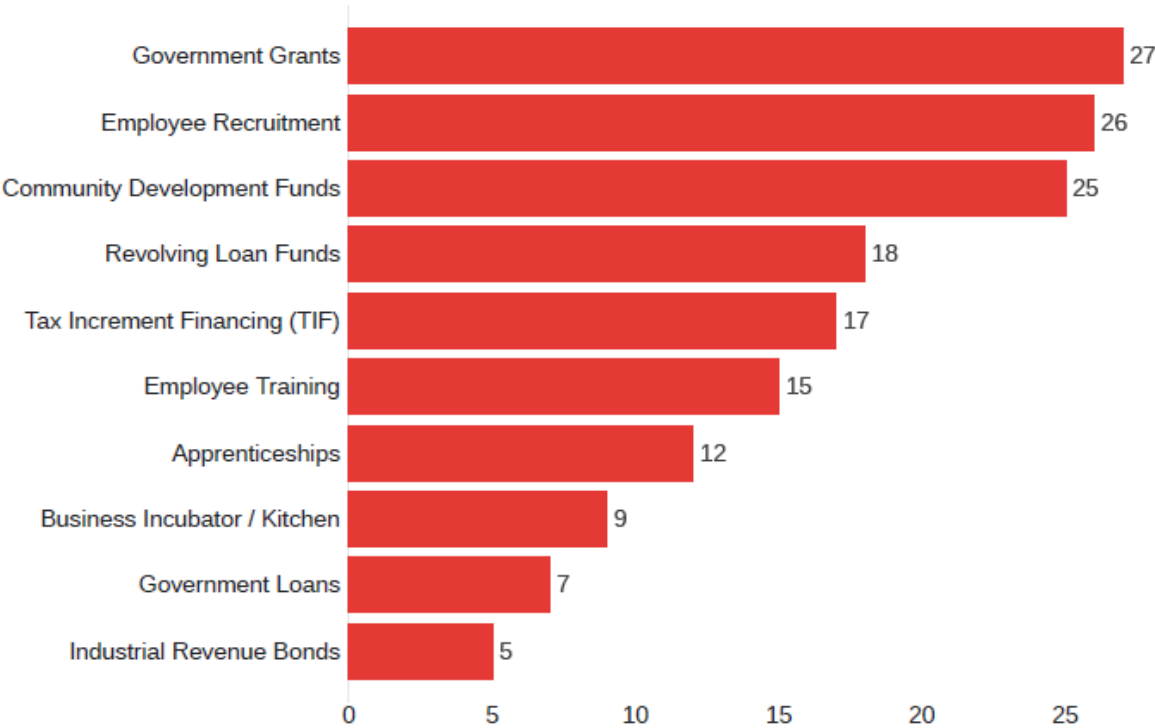
Live music development in the city and county parks.

Coordinated on FEMA and CDBG funding

covid grant

I'm involved with a nonprofit that received funding through the Econ Development budget

# What economic development tools or resources would help your business?



Other tools...

Not in Vernon County but if immigrants are coming and settling, they are no help if they don't speak English. They create quality issues if they can speak and confusion.

In today's world, every community needs to take advantage of every ED tool available based upon that community's needs, short and long-term.

Not being beggars. Businesses started with grants rarely last, cost us all and if profitable would have already existed.

Initiative and training on transitioning to employee-owned business.

not applicable

## Outside the box! What issues are important to you?

Field	Mean
Protecting Our Smaller Farms and Farmers	83.02
Expand Our Arts, Music, Culinary, and Creative Education Offerings and Community(s)	72.41
Employer Sponsored Childcare	71.06
Micro / Mini / ADU Housing or Apartment Units	64.91
Setting Aside land in Conservancy and Public Trust	61.92
Develop an AG Innovation and Education Center	59.76
Employer Sponsored Housing	55.58



# YOUR BIG IDEA!

## SHARE YOUR BIG IDEA!

Market the county to major cities to increase tourism. Small businesses add greatly to the quality of life in Vernon County. The population can't keep these businesses alive. Without an increase in visitor spending, most small businesses will go away in the next five years. Then who will stay or move here? What economy will be left to develop?

Our State should have protected the family farms years ago and put a cap on big factory Dairies. We have a surplus of milk most of the time and that drives the cost our dairy farmers milk prices down. The average age of the Wisconsin farm is 60+.

Outdoor pool!

Expand indoor family activity options by building a Family Rec Center (climbing wall, ropes course, food court, and other fun for all ages). Will help attract more families to the area, retain current families, create jobs, bring in revenue.

Immigration Prototype - Expand on Ag profile

Ability for small villages and towns to expand and

There is a local economy to be built around agri-tourism/green tourism in this county, the Home of the Nation's First Watershed Project, the Coon Creek Watershed Project, that literally changed the face of Earth and left its footprints throughout the Nation. This economy involves education, local businesses and farms, local products and services, arts and culture, environmentalism, conservation at its roots.

Way finding signage. Digital access for citizens and tourists alike. Flood mitigation...continuing efforts. More significant RLFs. Happy to sit and chat!

NOTHING ON THIS LIST HIGHLIGHTS OUTDOOR RECREATION

Job creation/expansion at wage levels to keep pace with cost of living for housing and other goods & services.

Live in Viroqua

An outdoor water park/feature somewhere (I think Viroqua because I live here).

Municipalities and the county should work together for bigger projects for incentives; specifically when it comes to affordable housing and downtown revitalization.

Farmers/Ag retraining - there are a number of professional opportunities in the organic sector for folks with an ag background but no longer want to or can farm.

Promote worker-owned businesses.

Expand technical workforce beginning with robust technology programs in areas K-12 schools.

Invest in multi use trail systems across the county connecting communities, parks, and public lands, with stamps and passports along the way so visiting trails in Vernon Co can be a complete and awesome destination trip!

Become a hub for renewable energy production and manufacturing.

music/arts cooperative development

help expand book village idea to surrounding communities

An idea was presented last year to the Econ Development committee to establish a micro grant program. Sadly, it was voted down and the funds went to two organizations in Crawford County. This was short-sighted. A "small" grant (\$1000) can help an initiative to grow! It can serve as seed money or matching funds for other grants. Also, having projects sponsored by Vernon County gives the County good PR and spreads the word that Vernon County is a desirable location. The County Board does not seem as committed to innovative ideas as they could be.

more...

---

Have the outdoor pool would keep so many family's happy all summer and provide life guard jobs to many.

At the beginning of the survey, please allow more than one option. I am expanding a current business, have acquired another business to expand, and am considering a new business. Please also think about the role nonprofits play in economic development and tourism. Our business association is working to drive tourism to the community in addition to promoting economic growth. Our watershed council is working to develop employment opportunities, profitability for producers and farmers, and increase tourism. Thank you.

I think it's important to not let the drive to grow business reshape the community in ways where it is no longer accessible to its current residents. Basically, we need to keep things affordable (housing, etc.), so this doesn't just become a monied community that caters to the wealthy, and relegates its current residents to service-based jobs.

Vernon County Economic Development Survey Questions



## Vernon County Economic Development Inventory

Please continue even if you live or work outside the county!

In which community of Vernon County do you currently reside?

In which community of Vernon County do you currently work?

If Working in Vernon County, Current Job status:

- Owner / Employer
- Management
- Employee / Staff
- Self-employed / Contractor / Professional
- Exploring New Business Options
- Student
- Not employed
- Retired
- I do not work in Vernon County

Your Age Group:

18-34 years

35-49 years

50-64 years

65+ years

Are you considering starting or expanding a business in Vernon County?

- No
- Yes, Start a new business
- Yes, Expanding an existing business

If yes, what are the primary factors influencing your decision to start or expand a business within the county?

Select All That Apply!

- Economic Support / Incentives
- Proximity to Customers
- Cost of Living / Housing
- Quality Employees
- Quality of Life
- Infrastructure
- Public Transit
- Transportation / Shipping
- Other (Enter Below)



**Creating and maintaining a diversified economic base is key to sustained economic growth and prosperity.**

Which of the following sectors would be a good fit for your community?

You may rank any or all answers:

	Strong Fit for Community	Fair Fit for Community	Bad Fit for Community
Agriculture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Forestry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Retail	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tourism	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Light Industrial Manufacturing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Heavy Industrial Manufacturing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Warehouse / Distribution	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Health / Medical / Life Services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial / Banking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professional Services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Real Estate & Development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Arts and Culture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leisure / Recreation / Entertainment or Hospitality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information / Technology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other: (Enter Below) <input style="width: 180px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What type of new business do you believe would provide higher paid skilled jobs within the region?

What other improvements would you suggest to enhance the county's business-friendly environment?

Which of the following Areas of Interest or Concern are important to you?

You may rank any or all answers:

	Important to Me	Somewhat Important	Not Important to Me
Aging Population	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Declining Young Adult Population	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attracting High-paying Skilled Jobs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Improving Infrastructure to Support Industrial/Commercial Growth	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Expanding the local tax base through non residential development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seeking a Work Life Balance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Providing Affordable Housing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Providing Affordable Childcare	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encouraging Green Building	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sustainable Renewable Energy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Providing and finding available land to accommodate any of the above services is a planning challenge in many of the communities within the County.**

If you could help shape economic development in Vernon County, what land use strategies would you support?

You may rank any or all answers:

	Important to Me	Somewhat Important	Not Important to Me
Promote vibrant downtown's and Communities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Promote business/industrial parks	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Develop sustainable commercial buildings and shopping areas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Renovate/recycle existing buildings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Establish business incubators	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Promote mixed use development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encourage high density growth in Cities and Villages	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encourage small scale development along rural corridors and crossroads	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encourage public transit oriented development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (Enter Below) <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Are there any regulatory or administrative barriers that hinder business growth in the county? If yes, please describe below.

No

Yes

**In an effort to better prepare and plan for economic development, Vernon County has established an Economic Development & Tourism Department and Coordinator.**

How can this individual best serve the needs of our communities? Please Rank!

Please drag and drop to rank these options.

Help Start or Expand new business in Vernon County

Promote Tourism and Visitation in the County

Support Workforce Development and Talent Acquisition

Work with Schools and Business to develop Apprenticeships and Learning Opportunities

Promote the Vernon County Economic Development Loan Fund

Meet or communicate with businesses to share data and resources

Work with Communities and other Development Entities to Market and Grow the Region

Are you aware of the economic development initiatives and programs offered by the County?

Definitely Aware

Somewhat Aware

Not Aware

Have you utilized any of the county's economic development services or resources? If yes, please specify below.

No

Yes

What economic development tools or resources would help your business?

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Districts

Revolving Loan Funds

Industrial Revenue Bonds

Community Development Block Grant Funds

Employee Training

Apprenticeships

Employee Recruitment

Government Loans

Government Grants

Business Incubator or Commercial Kitchen

Other (Enter Below)



## Outside the box!

Wisconsin and Vernon County has a long history of innovation and creativity. We want to share some ideas that have come across our desk that may be beyond traditional Economic Development. Some of these ideas are just "seeds of innovation" at this point, others are being developed as we speak. Let us know how you feel about them and most importantly let us know if you have any of your own BIG IDEAS! *Slide right if you support.*

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Develop an AG Innovation and Education Center



Micro / Mini / [ADU](#) Housing or Apartment Units



Protecting Our Smaller Farms and Farmers



Employer Sponsored Childcare



Employer Sponsored Housing



Setting Aside land in Conservancy and Public Trust



Expand Our Arts, Music, Culinary, and Creative Education Offerings and Community(s)



## YOUR BIG IDEA!



IF you want to share (not required), please enter your Name.

IF you want us to share with you, please enter your Email Address.

What did we miss and please share more about your "Big Idea"...

Record video

Record audio

Or you can type your answer here...



## Vernon County Economic Development Inventory

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.  
Your response has been recorded.



Vernon County Community Leaders and Concerned Citizens,

In an effort to get more community input for an update of Vernon County's Economic Development Strategy, Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission (MRRPC) will be holding focus group meetings to allow more people to share their ideas, concerns and interests. MRRPC will share a high-level overview of the results from the recent County EDS Survey as well as some other key data identified thus far. We ask you think about:

- What makes Vernon County a great place to live, work and play?
- What business needs are there in Vernon County?
- What may prevent businesses from expanding or locating in Vernon County?
- What can the County do to better support economic development?
- Any other ideas for increasing economic opportunity and improving the quality of life for County residents?

Please **RSVP** by 3 pm on Monday, 10/16/23 to let us know which session you will be attending by calling **608-397-7161**.

- Tuesday, 10/17, 5 - 6:30 pm at Hillsboro City Hall (upstairs)
- Wednesday, 10/18, 1 - 2:30 pm at DeSoto Community Center and DeSoto High School from 5 – 6:30 pm
- Thursday, 10/19, 1 - 2:30 pm at Westby Library Community Room (lower level) and again (some spot) 5 - 6:30 pm.

Please share this invitation with others you think could provide additional ideas and insights for this important community effort. We appreciate your involvement and thanks in advance for making the investment of time in the future of your community.

Jon Bingol, Executive Director, MRRPC

## SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP MEETING AND PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

MRRPC held focus group meetings across the County to give people an opportunity to provide more local insight and personal perspective into the economic realities and perceptions in their local communities as well as their relationship to the County situation. Each session had some attendance and while in each community MRRPC staff was also able to interview people who could not attend a session. Both, before and after the focus group meetings, MRRPC staff utilized the same questions (from the previous page) to conduct personal interviews.

28 participants at the focus groups held in Hillsboro, DeSoto and Westby, and an additional 42 personal interviews conducted around the County (both in person and by telephone). Based on the research, people choose Vernon County to live, work and play for its:

- Rural Character and Driftless Vibe
- Natural Beauty and Environmental Quality
- Unique Culture
- Sense of Community
- Good Schools and Good Healthcare
- Easy Proximity to Larger Cities

The information collected proved that many people had met and worked with the County's contracted Economic Development Coordinator and those individuals had the highest understanding of the County's activity. However, some of those individuals were less clear on the overall goals and priorities of the County leadership and gave examples of mixed messages or lacking direction from the County leadership. There were other people who did not have much awareness or accuracy regarding the activities and/or the results of successful County ED projects. There is an opportunity to enhance communication, image, and overall strategic direction. Also, many of those who participated expressed a willingness and interest in assisting with efforts to improve the economic viability and improvement in Vernon County.

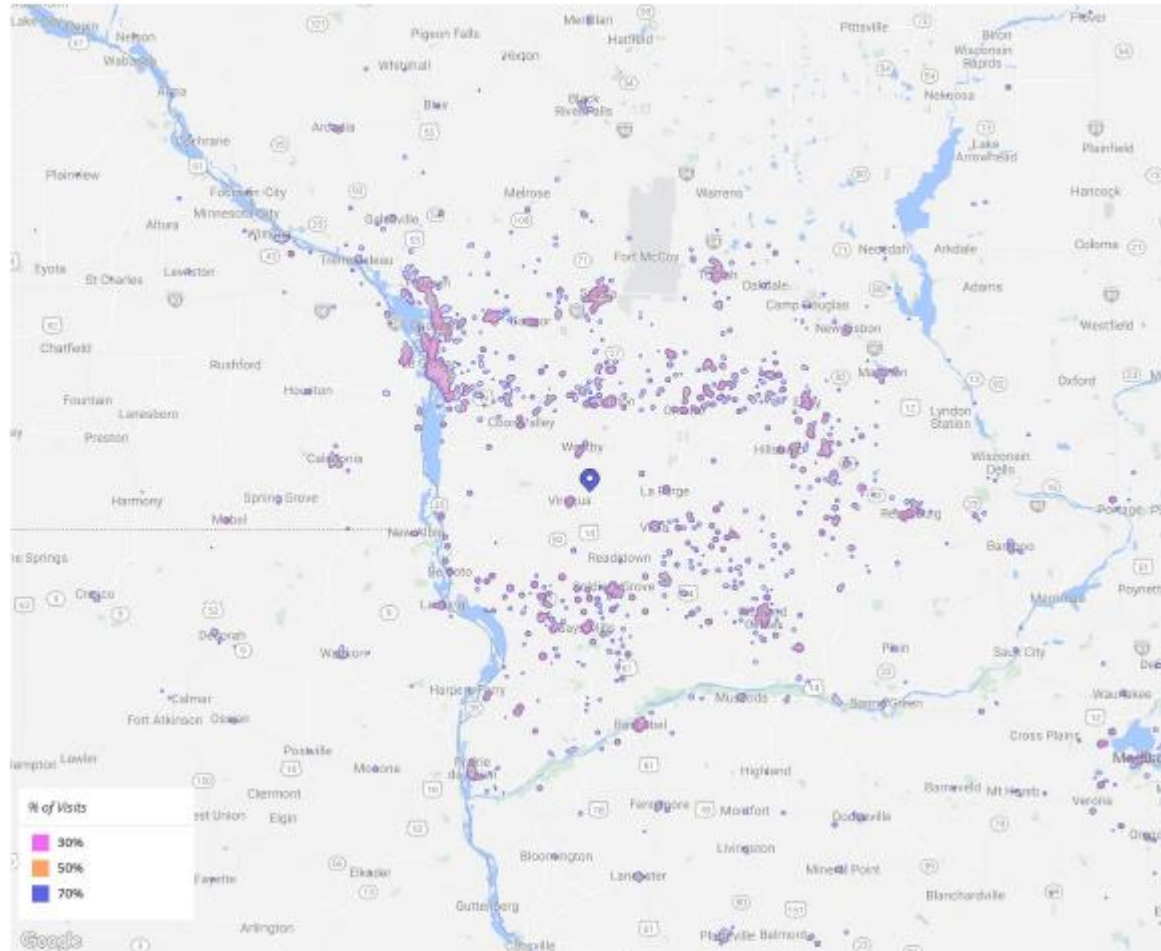
# Placer AI Visitor Audience Profile

## Audience Profile

Dec 1, 2022 - Nov 30, 2023



Vernon County, WI, USA / , Avalanche, WI



Home locations are obfuscated for privacy and randomly placed within a census block. They do not represent actual home addresses.



# Audience Profile

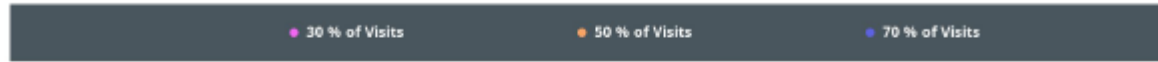
Dec 1, 2022 - Nov 30, 2023



## Vernon County, WI, USA

.Avalanche, WI

Benchmark: Nationwide



### Overview

Population	79,665	181,224	325,937
Pop density (per sq mile)	1,403	747	691
Area (sq mi) - based on Census Block Groups	56.78	242.47	471.58

### Households

Households	33,657	72,926	131,960
Family Households	16,470 (48.9%)	33,869 (46.4%)	63,271 (47.9%)
Non-Family Households	17,187 (51.1%)	39,057 (53.6%)	68,689 (52.1%)
Persons per Household	2.37	2.49	2.47

### Gender

Male	39,036 (49%)	90,139 (49.7%)	161,607 (49.6%)
Female	40,629 (51%)	91,085 (50.3%)	164,330 (50.4%)

### Age

Median Age	32.36	28.7	30.22
0-4	4,074 (5.1%)	8,000 (4.4%)	14,733 (4.5%)
5-14	7,729 (9.7%)	16,882 (9.3%)	31,274 (9.6%)

Calculated using Weighted Centroid from Block Groups | DataSet: Census 2021 | ACS

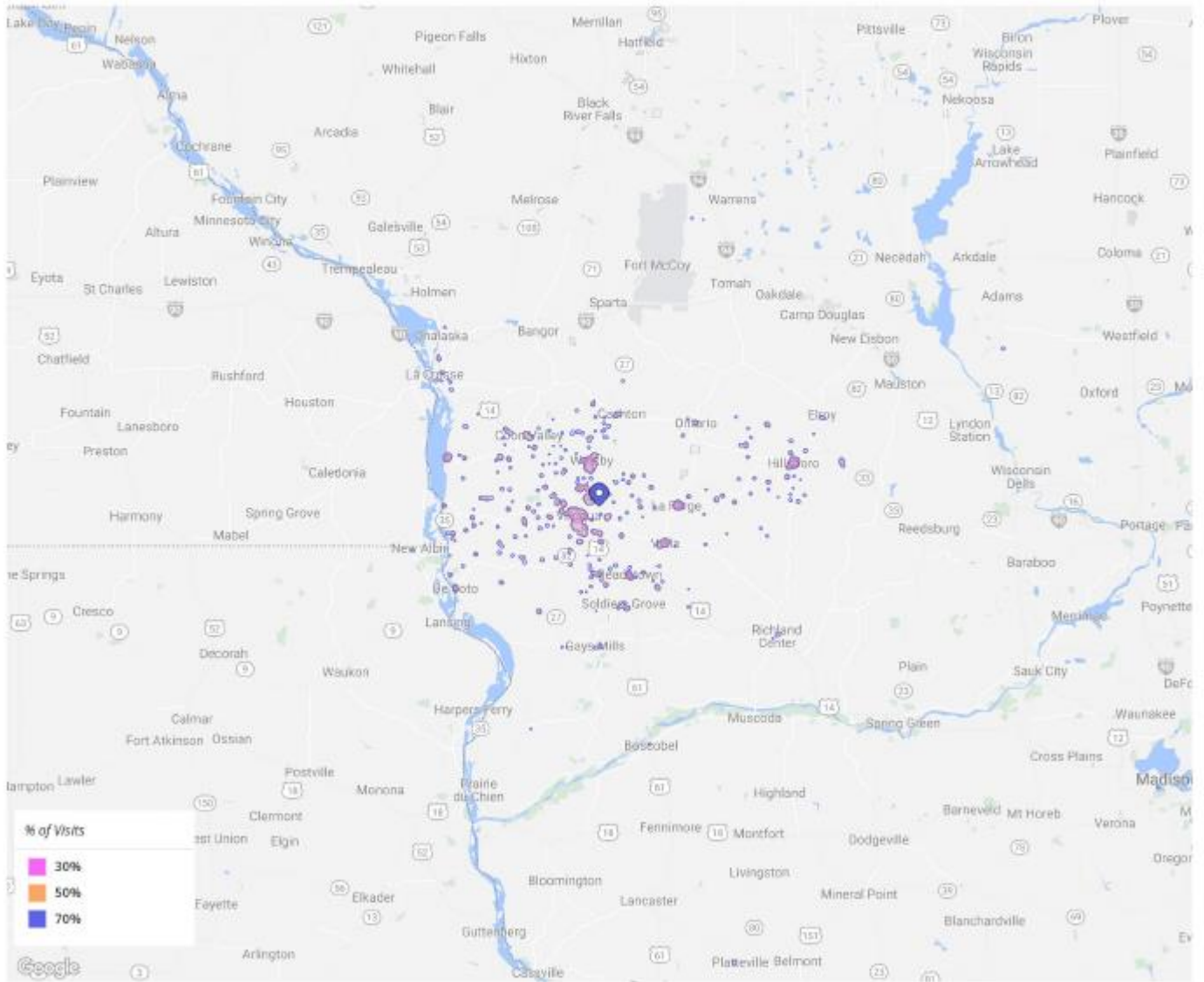
# Placer AI Employee Audience Profile

## Audience Profile

Dec 1, 2022 - Nov 30, 2023



Vernon County, WI, USA / , Avalanche, WI



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# Audience Profile

Dec 1, 2022 - Nov 30, 2023



## Vernon County, WI, USA

, Avalanche, WI

Benchmark: Nationwide

	30 % of Visits		50 % of Visits		70 % of Visits	
<b>Overview</b>						
Population	7,963		16,137		34,985	
Pop density (per sq mile)	212		256		255	
Area (sq mi) - based on Census Block Groups	37.56		63.1		137.02	
<b>Households</b>						
Households	3,444		5,675		12,468	
Family Households	2,028	(58.9%)	3,002	(52.9%)	6,278	(50.4%)
Non-Family Households	1,416	(41.1%)	2,673	(47.1%)	6,190	(49.6%)
Persons per Household	2.31		2.84		2.81	
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	4,069	(51.1%)	7,868	(48.8%)	17,731	(50.7%)
Female	3,894	(48.9%)	8,269	(51.2%)	17,254	(49.3%)
<b>Age</b>						
Median Age	45.01		28.99		27.16	
0-4	365	(4.6%)	661	(4.1%)	1,726	(4.9%)
5-14	1,156	(14.5%)	1,669	(10.3%)	3,574	(10.2%)

Calculated using Weighted Centroid from Block Groups | DataSet: Census 2021 (ACS)

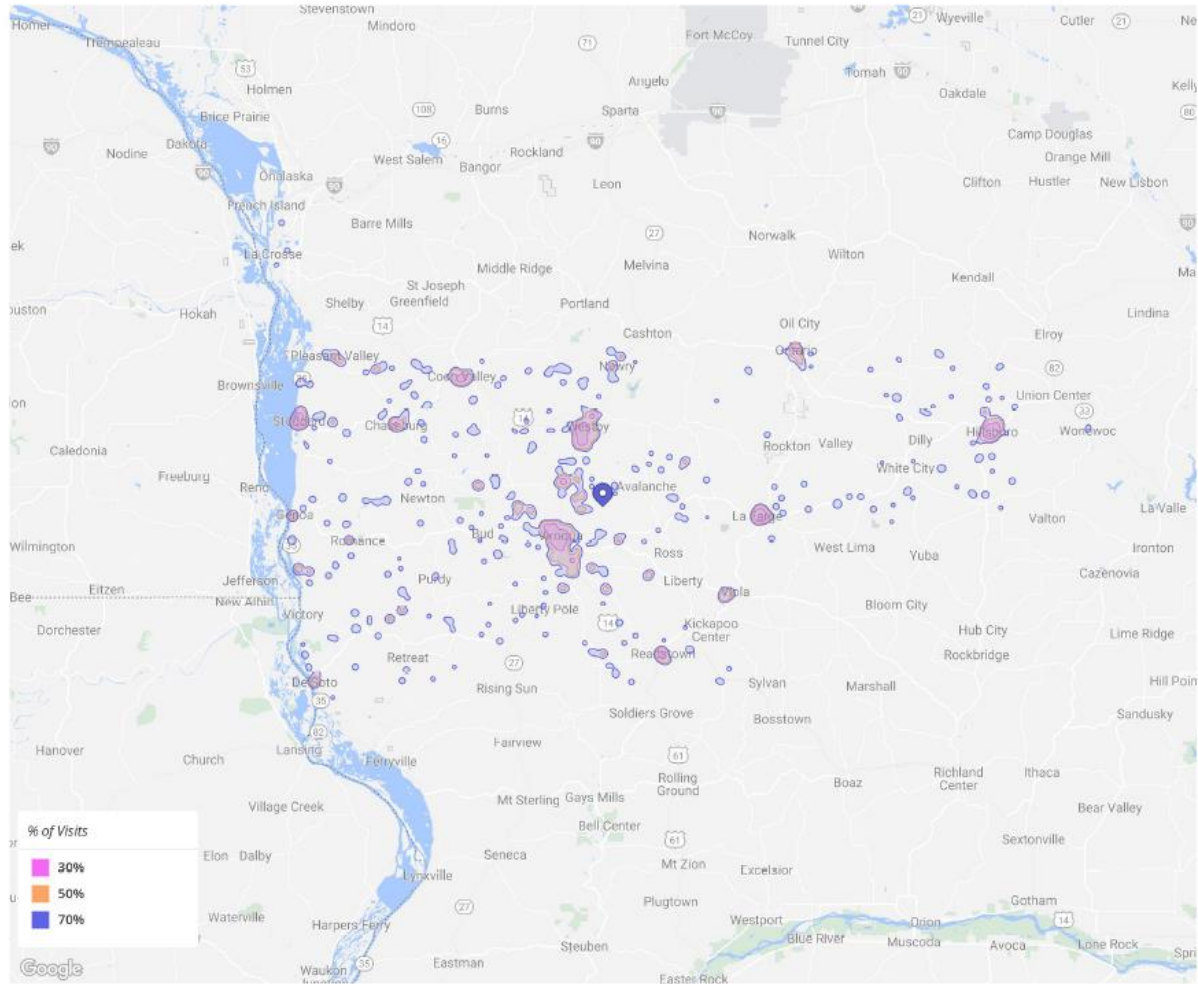
# Placer AI Resident Audience Profile

## Audience Profile

Dec 1, 2022 - Nov 30, 2023



Vernon County, WI, USA / , Avalanche, WI



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# Audience Profile

Dec 1, 2022 - Nov 30, 2023



## Vernon County, WI, USA

, Avalanche, WI

Benchmark: Nationwide

	30 % of Visits	50 % of Visits	70 % of Visits
<b>Overview</b>			
Population	8,936	11,932	25,551
Pop density (per sq mile)	197	190	202
Area (sq mi) - based on Census Block Groups	45.39	62.85	126.33
<b>Households</b>			
Households	3,858	5,169	8,413
Family Households	2,305 (59.7%)	2,967 (57.4%)	3,962 (47.1%)
Non-Family Households	1,553 (40.3%)	2,202 (42.6%)	4,451 (52.9%)
Persons per Household	2.32	2.31	3.04
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	4,546 (50.9%)	6,021 (50.5%)	13,507 (52.9%)
Female	4,390 (49.1%)	5,911 (49.5%)	12,044 (47.1%)
<b>Age</b>			
Median Age	43.8	43.34	23.4
0-4	433 (4.8%)	653 (5.5%)	1,047 (4.1%)
5-14	1,262 (14.1%)	1,669 (14%)	2,149 (8.4%)

Calculated using Weighted Centroid from Block Groups | DataSet: Census 2021 (ACS)