



VILAS COUNTY ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION



Rewriting the Rural Narrative

2020 ANNUAL REPORT

The Vilas County Economic Development Corporation (VCEDC), a 501c3 non-profit organization has a vision for Wisconsin's Northwoods and Vilas County, in particular.

In partnership with Vilas County, Nicolet College, area business leaders, the Lac du Flambeau Tribe, and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, VCEDC Executive Director Kathy Schmitz and our volunteer board of directors are working diligently to build a stronger Northwoods economy and help improve our overall quality of life.

In 2020, we were fortunate to add three new highly accomplished board members - Bill Niemuth, President of Loss Mitigation Solutions; Stefan Anderson, Director of Lowenwood; and, CPA Jon Chamberlain. Each are making significant contributions to our key initiatives. We were also pleased to add Mike Duening, Director of Vilas County IT, and Jonathan Sharp, a Software Engineer with Fortune 500 company Nvidia working remotely, to our professional volunteer team. Both have been great additions to the VCEDC broadband initiative.

A defining moment in the Board's history occurred this year when the Board extended its heartfelt gratitude to Dave Juday, who retired as Vice Chairman in December. Dave has made significant contributions over the years, and I'm very pleased and grateful that he is remaining on our board. I'd also like to acknowledge Noah Lottig, our new Vice Chairman. Noah serves as a Research Scientist with the UW-Madison Center for Limnology at Trout Lake Station.

Promoting our wonderful Northwoods lifestyle and our growing broadband infrastructure, the VCEDC remains committed to recruiting remote workers, entrepreneurs, and expanding businesses to find their "paradise" here in the Northwoods. We are also working to build an active, growing Northwoods "community" of business leaders to help improve not only business communication and collaboration, but social networks as well. We want everyone to know that Vilas County offers an extremely welcoming environment in which to work and live.

Because **high-speed internet access** throughout the county is crucial to a vibrant economy, we launched a county-wide initiative in 2020 to improve broadband. This work continues and it will be a multi-year effort.

A Message from the Board Chairman



Jim Tuckwell

As we began 2020, none of us foresaw the depth of pain and challenge that we would endure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, embracing Robert Frost's message that "the only way around is through" the VCEDC quickly rose to the challenge and began leading support for local businesses. We're impressed and grateful for the innovation, commitment, and concern the business community has shown for their employees and customers.

In September, we hosted nationally-recognized rural sociologist Ben Winchester for a virtual webinar entitled, "Rewriting the Rural Narrative," and are pleased that Ben is now highlighting Vilas County as a county that is "doing it right."

In December, we were honored to have Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers and Missy Hughes, CEO of the Wisconsin Economic Development



Governor Tony Evers

Missy Hughes

Corporation serve as the keynote speakers for our virtual annual meeting, conveying leadership and programming at the State level for our Northwoods businesses.

No doubt it's been an impactful year. I invite you to take a few moments to read about many of these initiatives in-depth in the following pages.

There is much to do, however, as we at the VCEDC share your passion for our Northwoods lifestyle, and remain committed to our vision. We are encouraged to see growing momentum, and look forward to helping us all emerge from the pandemic stronger and better positioned for future growth. We encourage you to join us, and thank you for your continuing support.

Jim Tuckwell

Jim Holperin

Commercial Property Manager, Eagle River

Vilas County is very fortunate to have an organization with the caliber of the Vilas County Economic Development Corporation to promote the county to potential new business owners and people expanding their businesses. It's quite evident that not every small community in the county can afford to have their own business development entity and so it's very important to have a county-wide entity.

I give a lot of credit to the Vilas County board for their financial support of the VCEDC and to the VCEDC Board and staff itself for their professionalism and expertise. This sends a very strong signal to the business community that Vilas County is welcoming, inviting and willing to assist all types of business.

When I look back on the year, the opportunity to serve as executive director of this great organization has exceeded my expectations.

I truly value the strong support and warm welcome that I've received from the VCEDC Board of Directors, the Vilas County Board of Supervisors, and both the Vilas County and Northwoods business community.

One year ago, Vilas County was a familiar place I moved to, to start my new job. Today, Vilas County is home.

No doubt, with the COVID-19 pandemic **it's been a challenging and emotional year.** I believe we have all stepped up in a proactive and thoughtful manner. Our business is here for your business, and we'll do whatever we can to help.

A key factor of 2020, and the foundation of our programming, was clearly articulating our purpose – To Build a Stronger Northwoods Economy. How do we accomplish that? By supporting current business, and attracting remote workers, entrepreneurs and new business to this fabulous Northwoods lifestyle in which you can conduct business around the world.

To ensure we communicate our message effectively, we applied for and received two significant grants that are funding our targeted social media and Google ad campaigns and events. The data shows results that exceed national metric standards.

The VCEDC marks its 10th anniversary with growing momentum and a strong future. This, as a result of the dedication and commitment from our

A Message from the Executive Director



Kathy Schmitz

stellar board of directors, a board whose members continue to inspire me each and every day.

In fall, the VCEDC welcomed nationally-recognized rural sociologist Ben Winchester to present “Rewriting the Rural Narrative: The Brain Gain of Rural America.”

The event included panelists who shared their stories of why they chose Vilas County as their home to live and work. In this report, we'll provide an opportunity for you to meet a few of these individuals, examples of how we are rewriting the rural narrative.

After the presentation Ben called me to congratulate the VCEDC for our leadership to put Vilas County “on the map.” The following words from Ben stood out for me: **“You are writing your own narrative by inviting people to come in.”**

WE ARE INDEED.

Kathy Schmitz

Virtual Webinar Features Nationally-Recognized Rural Sociologist Ben Winchester

“If rural America is dying, then why can’t I find a house to buy?”

This statement, according to Ben Winchester, is being heard around the country. Something is happening in rural America, the rural narrative is changing for the better, especially in Wisconsin’s Vilas County.

In September, the VCEDC offered an exclusive opportunity to hear first-hand from Ben Winchester as he presented “Rewriting the Rural Narrative – The Brain Gain of Rural America.” Winchester is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of MN Extension, Center for Community Vitality, and a nationally-recognized rural sociologist who has been featured on *PBS* and in the *NYTimes*.

The Vilas County Economic Development Corporation is at the forefront of Wisconsin’s Northwoods initiatives to grow its economy and population, supporting current data and socio-economic trends that the rural “narrative” is changing for the better. According to Winchester, the “rural rebound” has seen a tremendous increase in people moving from urban to rural living. Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, economic uncertainty, and social unrest this trend is accelerating, particularly in vacation destinations like Vilas County where people can live and work successfully.

According to Kathy Schmitz, VCEDC Executive Director, work is no longer a destination that you go to every day, it’s an outcome. “Many people no longer need to be near their jobs to be effective,” she said. “They can choose where they want to live, work remotely, earn a livable or even a high paying salary, and enjoy a rural lifestyle that includes lakes, forests, paved bike trails, and winter sports such as skiing, snowshoeing, and snowmobiling. Not all rural is rural – Vilas County is often considered ‘the Poconos’ of Wisconsin.”

“Rewriting the Rural Narrative”



Ben Winchester

In Vilas County, this population shift is supported by expanding broadband, increasing awareness of the benefits of working remotely, a more balanced pace of life, safety and security. The “Brain Gain” of 30 to 49-year-olds moving to rural America is happening in Vilas County.

“The continuing development of Vilas County’s broadband infrastructure, a leading initiative of the VCEDC, positions the VCEDC to attract entrepreneurs, expanding businesses, and remote workers who want to enjoy the beautiful Northwoods lifestyle while pursuing attractive career opportunities, year-round,” said VCEDC Board Chairman Jim Tuckwell. “Vilas County is fast becoming a haven for knowledge workers.”

Vilas County ranks 12th in the state in population growth since 2010, up over two percent since 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau).

The virtual event included a presentation by Winchester followed by a panel comprised of individuals who have moved to Vilas County to work both in the county and remotely.

“ When I go around the country to give my talks, I’m going to use Vilas County as the county that is doing it right! ”

Holly Tomlonovich

Vilas County
Board Supervisor
& Chairperson,
Economic
Development &
Tourism Committee

During the COVID crisis, everybody was scrambling. What was great is when I received emails and shared them with Kathy at the VCEDC, Kathy would then take that information and share it with area business to help them.

Many of those emails had to do with grant funds, of which many of the business owners had to apply for almost instantaneously, and so I'm not sure without that collaboration how many businesses would have been successful. Without the VCEDC I'm really truly not sure where businesses would have gone to seek help.

This organization brings forth people who have a wealth of knowledge and I thank them.

COVID-19 Pandemic: Our Business is Here for Your Business

Masks, social distancing, and washing hands became the “new normal” in 2020 as our region, the country, and the world adjusted to the unimaginable COVID-19 pandemic.

Founded in 2010, the Vilas County Economic Development Corporation's goal is to “Connect resources to the various sector partners of Vilas County to improve the economic future of the county and the quality of life for all residents.”

In addition to our overall mission to attract new business, entrepreneurs and remote workers, during this pandemic we seek to serve our county by helping provide business owners with the information and resources they need, and advocating for small business in discussions with county and state officials. The goal, to sustain the small businesses – the restaurants, lodges, bars, gift shops, and non-profits that have been so vital to our region.

Early on in the pandemic we spoke with many small business owners and took to heart the enormous financial and emotional challenges they faced, and that we faced as a community. Many simply didn't know where to turn for help, or what help was available. None of that help could come soon enough.

During these unprecedented times, we understand that timely information and communication is critical. At the VCEDC we strive to provide the most up-to-date resources available. Here are just a few examples of how we supported local business during the pandemic:

Business Resource Page: We developed a “one-stop-shop” COVID-19 business resource page on our website that contains the latest information on webinars, financial assistance, and other business resources.

Grant Assistance: The VCEDC provided financial guidance and support to numerous businesses seeking grants for COVID-19 relief. An example is the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) “We're All In” grant. This resulted in more than \$700,000 in grants dispersed to Vilas County businesses. Of these, 25 businesses received direct support from the VCEDC resulting in \$62,500 in grants to the local economy.

Small Business Webinars: It was critical that the VCEDC ensure the voices of local business owners were heard, and their questions answered. The COVID-19 Northwoods Small Business Webinar, held on March 31st featuring regional business and political leaders, provided a first step to answer critical questions from Northwoods small business owners. Five more webinars followed including “The New Normal” hosted by Dick Leinenkugel, President/Chief Beer Merchant, Jacob Leinenkugel Brewing Company.


Expert Support: Leaders on the VCEDC board of directors, together with our partners in the region including the Small Business Administration and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, were readily available to talk with small business owners to help them navigate their options.

We continue our support during 2021 and extend our gratitude to everyone on the front lines who continue to ensure the safety and health of our families and neighbors.

Joe Fritzsche

Chairman,
Town of Conover
Broadband
Committee

We really appreciate the VCEDC and their help with the Town of Conover broadband committee. The VCEDC provided us with background information based on the research that they had done and it gave us an idea who the players were, the internet service providers, where the infrastructure was located, and also gave us some insight about what the county-wide goals and objectives were. Because of the experience and knowledge that the VCEDC developed and has been willing to share with us on a partnership basis, we can proceed with better information and a better understanding rather than making it up as we go along.



VCEDC Leads Vilas County BROADBAND INITIATIVE

Improved broadband coverage is critical to ensure a
VIBRANT ECONOMY IN THE NORTHWOODS.

In spring 2020, the Vilas County Economic Development Corporation (VCEDC) formed the VCEDC Broadband Workgroup to support the 16 municipalities in Vilas County and the Lac du Flambeau Tribe. The workgroup is comprised of VCEDC Board Chairman Jim Tuckwell, VCEDC Board Member/Broadband Lead Bill Niemuth, VCEDC Professional Volunteers Jonathan Sharp, a software engineer with Nvidia; Vilas County IT Director Mike Duening, and VCEDC Executive Director Kathy Schmitz.

The workgroup began by initiating a research study which included interviews with the Lac du Flambeau Tribe and Vilas County town chairmen as well as their subject matter experts. We also interviewed the internet service providers (ISPs) that serve Vilas County to better understand the current scope of broadband in Vilas County.

We were inspired by the tremendous engagement that we received from the towns, the Lac du Flambeau Tribe, and ISP leadership. Therefore, the workgroup set forth to share its results with the towns and community, and develop an action plan that would include:

- Informational webinars
- Train the Trainer sessions for the towns
- The establishment of a comprehensive broadband information tab on the VCEDC website
- One-on-one support for broadband workgroups throughout the county
- Town grant support with the Public Service Commission
- Discussion of a county-wide broadband grant proposal.
- “Broadband Buddies” to work with the municipalities and the Lac du Flambeau Tribe to help them move their plans forward.

The VCEDC Broadband Workgroup 2021 broadband objectives are as follows:

1. To develop and implement projects to improve broadband to 1,000 Vilas County homes and businesses in 2021/2022.
2. To develop a robust communications plan for Vilas County stakeholders about broadband, starting with a survey.
3. The survey will determine more specifically who does and who does not have broadband. Communications will be developed to further engage the consumer and business population.

The VCEDC is well on its way to achieve its multi-year objective to ensure Vilas County has sufficient broadband to sustain and grow its economy and culture for future generations.

VCEDC Launches 2020 Outreach Campaign

“I found paradise in Wisconsin’s Northwoods. **YOU CAN TOO!**”

An expanding broadband infrastructure offers Vilas County business a window to worldwide commerce, and we see remote workers and businesses beginning to leverage this opportunity. With over 1,300 lakes, Vilas County has a unique opportunity to further develop itself as a welcoming environment for business, making it easier for businesses to succeed, and engage and attract entrepreneurs, remote workers and expanding businesses from outside the area to live and pursue their careers here.

In 2020, the VCEDC launched a multi-faceted marketing outreach campaign featuring paid social media and Google advertising designed to communicate the advantages of living and working in Wisconsin’s beautiful Northwoods, offering both a high-quality lifestyle and income. We’re most grateful for a private grant which is supporting this campaign.

So, let’s meet a few of those who have already ‘found paradise’ in Wisconsin’s Northwoods.



Entrepreneurs

Brad & Rubie Gauthier

Owners – Sitecast, Web/Software Development Company

Tech entrepreneurs Brad and Rubie Gauthier moved to the Northwoods from Portland, OR, in 2016. A big reason they moved here – quality of life, the four seasons, cost of living, and an extensive network of paved bike trails.

“One summer Rubie and I came here and we went biking on the bike paths, hiking and went out on the boat, and Rubie fell in love with it,” said Brad. “We decided that if we can work remotely and can work from anywhere, let’s move here.”

A native of Lac du Flambeau, Brad always knew that he wanted to return to Wisconsin’s Northwoods. He met Rubie, a native of the Philippines, and executive at Hewlett Packard, in Portland. They both shared a passion for travel and the outdoors, and with their tech backgrounds they started their own software development company, Sitecast, where they build high-performing websites.



“What’s really crazy is that tourists will pay thousands of dollars to vacation here for a week, and we get to live here year-round,” said Brad.

“One of the things that I find really exciting is that in our backyard we have deer, fox and other animals and our little baby gets to see them all the time.”

According to Rubie, the Northwoods is ideal because of the lower cost of living and operational cost for their business.

“It’s really a remote workers’ paradise,” said Brad. If you’re starting a business or want to grow your business it’s ideal here because there is so much opportunity. And, we actually have quicker internet at our house now than at our condo out west.”

Remote Worker



Jonathan Sharp

Software Engineer, Nvidia – A Fortune 500 Company

“The thing that’s unique about the Northwoods is the beauty and how pristine it is. There’s a slower pace of life that you’re not going to have in the city. The people are friendly and engaging and there are so many outdoor activities to do and raising a family is wonderful. The schools are great and the kids can be outside and running around.

We truly get the best of both worlds. I work for a major corporation and I have the beauty of the Northwoods right out my front door. And, broadband has enabled me to do that here. We moved here seven years ago and there has been a lot of investment and improvement in coverage across the board.

I found paradise in Wisconsin’s Northwoods.”



Remote Worker



Amelia Gagliano

Solutions Manager, Errand Solutions – A Global Company

“I live in Phelps, WI, and working remotely has been an incredible blessing for me and my lifestyle. One of the things that I really do love about living in the Northwoods is the four seasons. My hobby is dog mushing and we are centrally located and in some of the best snow in the world. I don’t know of anywhere else that we could enjoy as much of the outdoors and work successfully in a quiet and serene area.

People from big cities will ask where are you working from, where is Land O’ Lakes? I’m doing all of this great work for Errand Solutions right here in the Northwoods, and with our broadband access, you can.”





Lizeth Lanz Shattner

Owner – Simply Pretty Spa, Eagle River, WI

With the high cost of living in San Diego, and the desire to be closer to family, Lizeth and Will Shattner decided to move from the West Coast to the Northwoods, namely, Eagle River. Lizeth, an esthetician, had a dream of opening her own spa someday, and Eagle River would present her with that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. With family support and guidance from the VCEDC, Lizeth opened her spa in early spring. Her business continues to thrive by word of mouth and her natural savvy for business. Lizeth is certain that with the pandemic she would have never been able to re-open or be successful in San Diego.

“I was surprised to have clients the first week I opened,” said Lizeth. “My advice to anyone looking to open a business is to just jump in. There is never going to be a perfect time. There are people here that want you to succeed. Even if you don’t know exactly what you want, if you know what you want to create, call the right people, and in my case, it was the VCEDC.”



Sue Pukall
Co-Owner,
Pukall Lumber
Company

The Vilas County Economic Development Corporation is a force for going out and connecting various groups and organizations. It sends a message that Vilas County is progressive and actively looking for ways to grow the business base and develop the workforce here.

**Learn more about Brad & Rubie,
Jonathan, Lizeth and Amelia by
visiting www.vilascountyedc.org**

Sandy Bishop

Executive Director,
Economic &
Community
Development at
Nicolet College

Since 2013, the VCEDC has partnered with Nicolet College to provide entrepreneurial education and small business development assistance to more than 100 residents of Vilas County who were interested in starting or expanding their businesses. These efforts have directly contributed to dozens of businesses in the county. Now more than ever, businesses are relying on the VCEDC as a trusted one-stop-shop to weather the storm of this past year to come out even stronger on the other side.

VCEDC Establishes Business of the Month Award

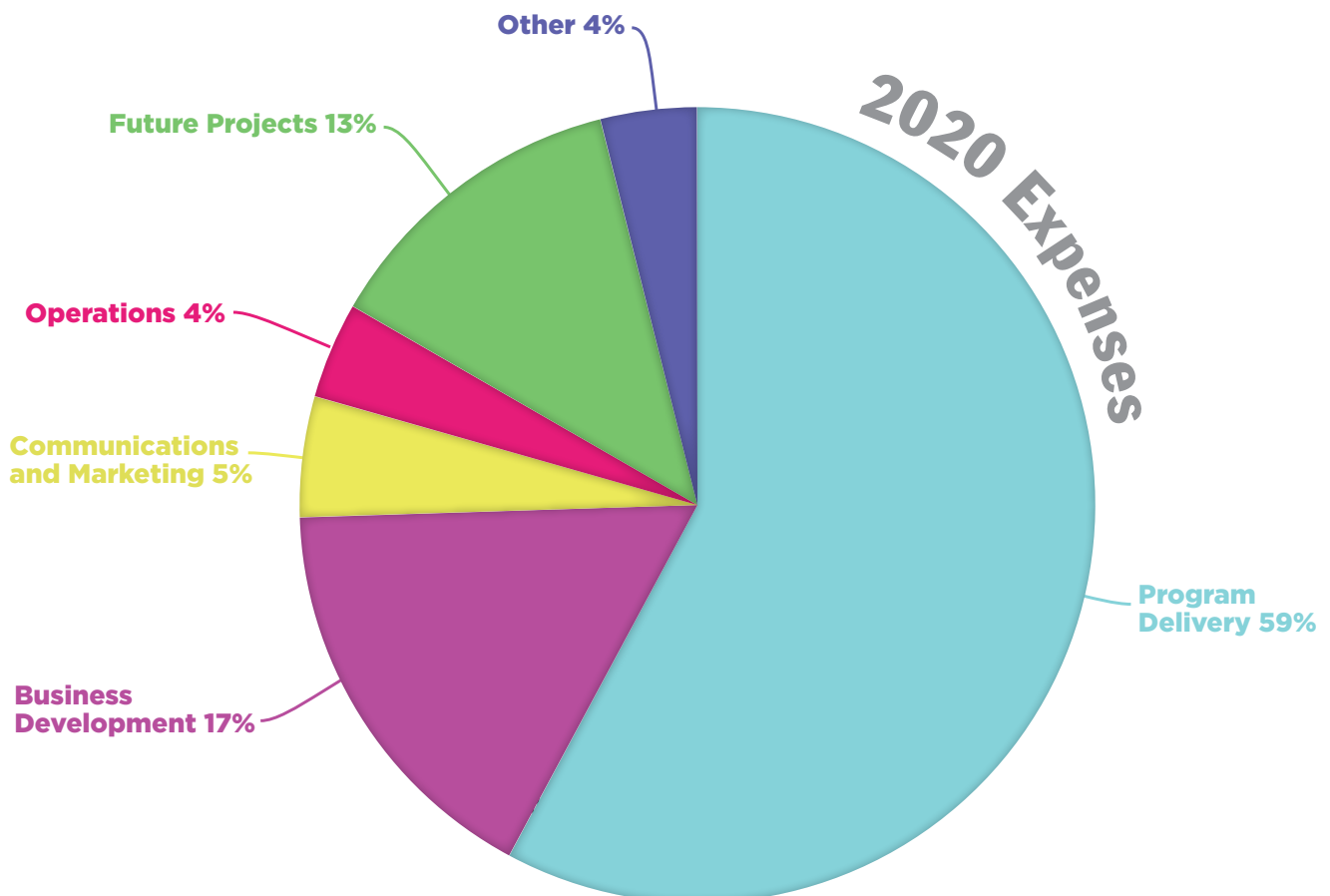
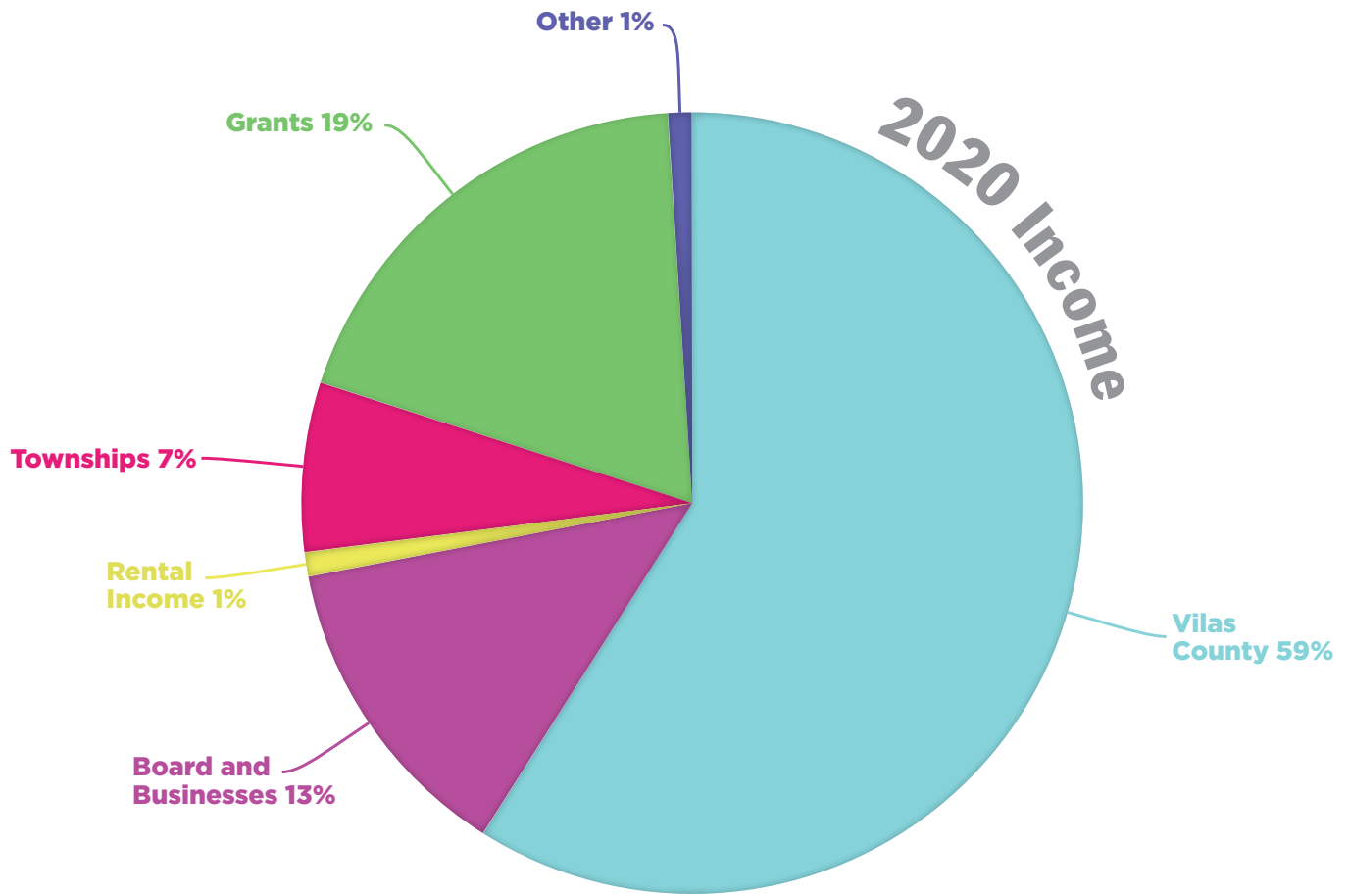
- Innovation • Flexibility • Growth • Service

In February, the VCEDC launched its Business of the Month Award. The award recognizes a business each month who demonstrates innovation, flexibility, growth, and service. One business is selected for the Business of the Year Award. Here is a look back at the 2020 Business of the Month and Business of the Year award recipients! **CONGRATULATIONS!**

BUSINESSES OF THE MONTH AWARDS:



2020 Financials





2020 VCEDC Leadership:

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Kathy Schmitz

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Jeff Currie

Mike Duening

Jonathan Sharp

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