

2024



# Vilas County Economic Development Corporation

Annual Report



VILAS COUNTY ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION



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“The VCEDC has provided valuable opportunities to connect with local entrepreneurs through networking events and practical Lunch & Learn workshops. Kathy has been a wonderful resource – offering thoughtful suggestions and personalized support as my businesses continue to grow.”

*Angie McGuire*

Owner, Dollar Lake Retreat

**Building a Stronger Northwoods Economy**

Cover photo: Congratulations to Eagle River Animal Hospital as the VCEDC 2024 Business of the Year! (L to R): Amber Plautz, CVT, Practice Manager; Dr. Katie Hom, Owner/DVM.



**"I hope as you read this report, you'll feel proud of the role you play in making Vilas County a wonderful place to live, vacation, and do business."**

## **Jim Tuckwell - Board Chairman**



Dear Friends,

At the VCEDC, we're creating a strong, diverse, resilient economy that thrives year-round, in and out of tourist season in Vilas County.

That work includes:

- Investing in our small business community by providing the 1-1 and broad support, education, and networking they need to succeed;
- Collaborating with leaders on development projects that set us up for long term prosperity;
- Educating the next generation of entrepreneurs through partnerships with local schools;
- Bringing broadband infrastructure here to attract and retain businesses, entice potential tourists, and ensure our seasonal residents stay here longer.

I'm especially proud of our work on broadband because it gives us a strong competitive advantage among Northwoods counties and makes future economic growth possible.

In less than five years, a VCEDC-led initiative has taken Vilas County from 5% broadband coverage to 86% broadband coverage!

We're not finished yet, though!

In 2025, we're working with Internet Service Providers to apply for and implement BEAD Grant funding to provide coverage to the remaining 14% of the county. We're also developing a regional ad campaign marketing Vilas County as a broadband destination.

As a small rural economic development corporation, we're proud of the breadth and depth of the work we do to support and strengthen our small businesses.

This work is possible because of Kathy, our talented Executive Director; a dedicated Board of Directors who goes above and beyond to volunteer their time, talent, and experience; and supporters like you. Thank you!

*Jim Tuckwell*

**“We’re privileged to lead this work every day to support our small business owners, the heart of a thriving economy.”**

## **Kathy Schmitz - Executive Director**



Dear Friends,

While tourists may visit to enjoy time on our world-class lakes and rivers and in our pristine forests, we know it's the people who make this place truly special.

I'm privileged to meet and work with some of these folks every day, people like:

- Kelly Cooper, VCEDC board member, who's growing her dream business with LakeTime Management, a personal concierge service, and who is helping us lead the Vilas County Women in Business Networking events;
- Jeremy Ryan, Phelps Town Supervisor, who, along with the entire town board, saw a problem holding Phelps back and went to work finding a solution;
- Jake Richards, Business Education Teacher at Northland Pines High School (NPHS), and an impressive cohort of business leaders, who are collaborating on a new VCEDC Entrepreneurial Education Program at NPHS.

These individuals – and so many more – are why I'm proud to live in our beautiful Northwoods and serve as Executive Director of the VCEDC.

At the VCEDC, we are committed to creating a welcoming, business-friendly community, and we're following through on that commitment by:

- providing personalized support plus high-value educational and networking events for small business owners;
- leading infrastructure and development projects;
- educating the next generation of entrepreneurs; and much more!

We're privileged to lead this work every day to support our small business owners, the heart of our thriving economy.

And we do it because the key to our collective prosperity lies in making sure small business owners and entrepreneurs feel supported, connected, and excited about the possibilities *here*.

As you read through this report, I hope you'll be inspired by the work we're doing and proud of yet another way Vilas County shines – as the place to start and grow a business.

*Kathy Schmitz*

# About the VCEDC

## Mission

To create a strong, diverse, resilient economy that thrives year-round, in and out of tourist season. We are a catalyst for economic innovation and sustainable prosperity in Vilas County.

“Kathy and the Vilas County EDC have been a great resource to support the growth of my business. Within the first few weeks of talking to Kathy, she had already started referring us to customers. The video they made for us did very well on social media and had great feedback. I recommend reaching out to the VCEDC for any business looking to grow in the Vilas County area.”

*Jordan Kohn*

Owner, Backwoods Services

## Strategic Priorities

### 1. Broadband

Complete the rollout of broadband and market Vilas County as a broadband destination.

### 2. 1-1 Small Business Consulting

Provide tailored, individualized support to small business owners and entrepreneurs.

### 3. Educational & Networking Events

Support the business community at large through events that foster growth and connection, including the next generation of entrepreneurs.

### 4. Phelps Redevelopment Project

Help build the long-term prosperity in the Town of Phelps through leadership on the redevelopment of an abandoned hospital site.

Read more about our work on these strategic priorities in the following pages!



# Strategic Priority #1

## Broadband Expansion Nears Completion

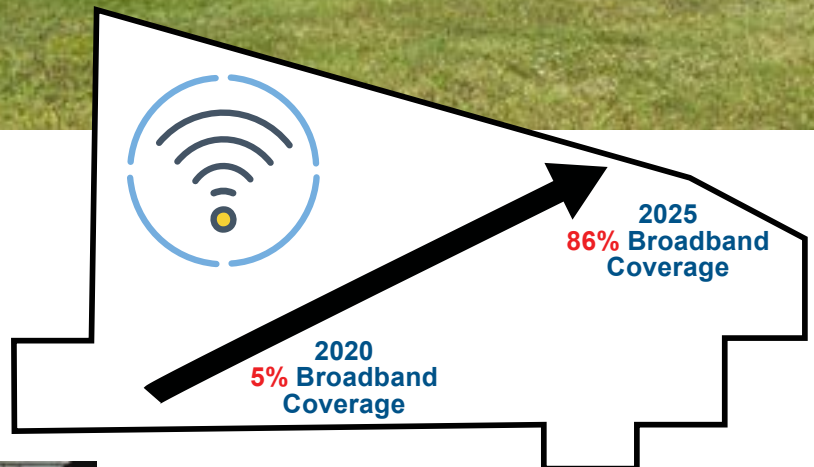
### It all started with a vision

to bring broadband infrastructure to Vilas County and secure our competitiveness to attract entrepreneurs and remote workers, ensure our seasonal residents can stay here longer, and entice tourists looking to play in the Northwoods.

In only five years, we've increased broadband coverage by 81% in Vilas County. Today, 86% of Vilas County is covered by a broadband project that is completed or under contract.

Now, it's time to finish the work and get the word out.

Broadband installation in Arbor Vitae



Ribbon cutting ceremony for Eighth Fire Communications, a groundbreaking broadband venture by the Lac du Flambeau Tribe's Business Development Corporation aimed at bringing high-speed internet to the Lac du Flambeau area.

### Here's what's on the agenda for 2025:

- Work with the Internet Service Providers to apply for and implement BEAD Grant funding to provide coverage to the remaining 14% of the county.
- Run a regional ad campaign marketing Vilas County as a broadband destination. Funding for the campaign has been secured, thanks to a generous grant from Incredible Bank and financial support from a private foundation.

# Strategic Priority #2

## 1-1 Consulting Boosts Small Business

20 businesses served through in-depth consultations for business owners and entrepreneurs in 2024!

Consultations cover topics such as:

- Developing a business plan
- Referrals to entrepreneur classes
- Digital marketing
- Grant assistance and research
- Business financing
- Website support

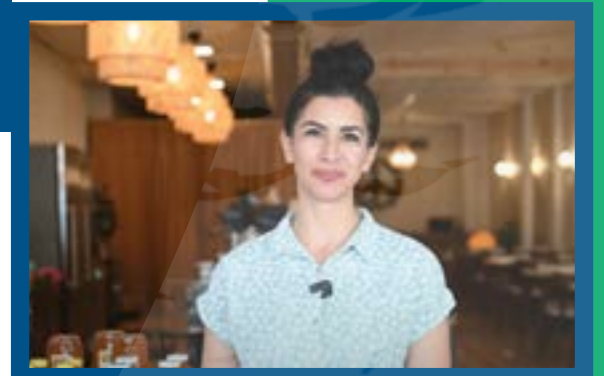
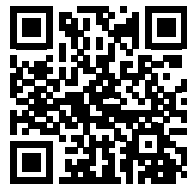
In addition, we highlighted 14 businesses through social media videos, garnering those businesses hundreds of views.

### Vilas County EDC Business Minute Videos



Scan the QR Code to watch videos featuring local businesses!

Scan me!



Our trademark service continues to receive high marks from business owners and entrepreneurs eager for local, tailored business guidance!

**Do you need 1-1 Small Business Consulting in 2025?**

**Reach out to Kathy at**

**[Kathy@VilasCountyEDC.org](mailto:Kathy@VilasCountyEDC.org)**



# Strategic Priority #3

## Educational & Networking Events

### Expand Reach

*We're connecting current and future small business owners and entrepreneurs with the knowledge and relationships they need to succeed.*

#### By the numbers:

- 300 participants in VCEDC Events
- 6 virtual Lunch & Learns
- 85 attendees to Women in Business Networking Events in April and October

You can watch past Lunch & Learns in full on the VCEDC YouTube channel!

#### 2024 Lunch & Learn Topics:

Drive Customers to Your Website with Digital Advertising

How to Create Social Media Videos to Promote Your Business

Answering Your Questions about Business Taxes, Insurance, Grants and Loans

Local Zoning Ordinances for Business

AI Basics for Small Business

How to Develop a Business Plan

VCEDC Spring and Fall Women in Business networking events were a huge hit!

Want to be the first to know about upcoming events?

Visit [www.vilascountyedc.org](http://www.vilascountyedc.org)!



Left photo: Women in Business Networking Leadership Committee: (l to r) Terri Goldschmidt, The Healing Path; Jill Brunstad, Nova Integrated Care; Kathy Schmitz, Vilas County EDC; Lisa Myszka, Living Life Healthy; Kelly Cooper, LakeTime Management. Not pictured: Katie De La Garza, Associated Bank; Heidi Reiter-Kramsvogel, Incredible Bank.



# Strategic Priority #4

## Phelps Redevelopment Project



An interview with Jeremy Ryan, Phelps Town Supervisor, and member of the Phelps Project Team, highlights VCEDC's ability to get results for Vilas County!

### *Jeremy, tell us about yourself and why you love Vilas County.*

Growing up, my family vacationed in this area every year. I always looked forward to being here! In 2015, I moved to Vilas County full-time. I lived in Eagle River first, but eventually moved to Phelps, where my parents are.

I'm super engaged in the community as a realtor, firefighter, and Board Supervisor for the Town of Phelps.

### *What challenge led to the Town of Phelps reaching out to the VCEDC?*

For almost a decade we've had an abandoned hospital site on Hwy 17 as you drive into Phelps. At one time, the hospital was one of the county's largest employers, but now it's an eyesore and a safety concern. It has really affected the way people view Phelps – and has negatively affected land values.

In 2023, Phelps obtained ownership of the site. With bids for demolition coming in around \$350,000, we needed help finding funding.

### *What made you think the VCEDC would be a good partner?*

I saw the work they'd done on other projects, and when I reached out to county municipalities for guidance, they all pointed me to the VCEDC.

I mistakenly thought the VCEDC was an arm of the County government. But when I talked with Kathy the first time, I learned so much about what they do and the connections and resources they have. Kathy came to visit the site, and her enthusiasm alone led me to believe, "Yes, this is who we want to work with!"

### *How has partnering with VCEDC helped Phelps move forward on the hospital project?*

Soon after Phelps reached out to the VCEDC, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) announced the Thrive Rural grant program to provide funding and resources for a variety of projects across the state.

We put together a project team, and with the VCEDC's leadership, applied for a grant, and were awarded \$25,000 and two years of technical support for the project.

That money paid for a consultant to conduct a study to determine what kinds of projects are feasible and of interest to local

stakeholders. We wanted a project that made sense economically – and that had local buy-in.

At the end of 2024, we presented the results of that study to the town and the residents.

Now, we're applying for another \$25,000 grant to hire an architectural firm to develop renderings of what this potential project could look like. That way, we can reach out to developers with a solid proposal for investing in our community.

We've also won an Idle Sites grant to help with 25% of demolition costs. That's huge. That's money we don't have to levy in taxes. VCEDC helped us with that grant application, too.

### *Wow! That's a lot of progress in a short amount of time! What's the experience of working with the VCEDC been like?*

We wouldn't be here without them. Their support has given a ton of credibility to this project. Because of them, we have a county board supervisor on our team. We have people connected with the WEDC on our team.

And Kathy as lead keeps us on task. She has a media background which has proven its value time and again.

But what's been remarkable to me is the connections Phelps has made because of the VCEDC. We've had meetings with people who will be able to help Phelps down the road on other projects, like tackling our need for more affordable housing.

### *What do you think the impact of redeveloping the hospital site will be for Phelps?*

This will be such a milestone for Phelps. I hope it will be a tipping point to show we are investing in our community.

Developing that site will be a \$25-\$30 million project, which will grow our tax base and increase our shared revenue. We expect this project will bring new small businesses here and encourage further developments. That growth encourages residents to stay here for the long term and will make us a more attractive short-term destination for tourists to the area.

The list of ways this can impact us for the good – not only today and tomorrow but long-term – goes on and on. And it wouldn't have been done without the VCEDC.

# Thank you!

Thanks to Jeremy for taking the time to chat with us about his experience with the VCEDC! It's a privilege to be part of this project.



## VCEDC Phelps Redevelopment Leadership Team

(Front row) (left) Caroline Ritter, Vice Chair, Vilas County Board of Supervisors; Jeremy Ryan, Phelps Town Supervisor. (Back row) Jim Cleveland, Rural Development Specialist, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation; Kathy Schmitz, VCEDC Executive Director; Kristen Fish-Peterson, Redevelopment Resources. Not pictured: Jim Tuckwell, VCEDC Board Chairman. Front middle: Maureen Robinson - Phelps Town Supervisor.

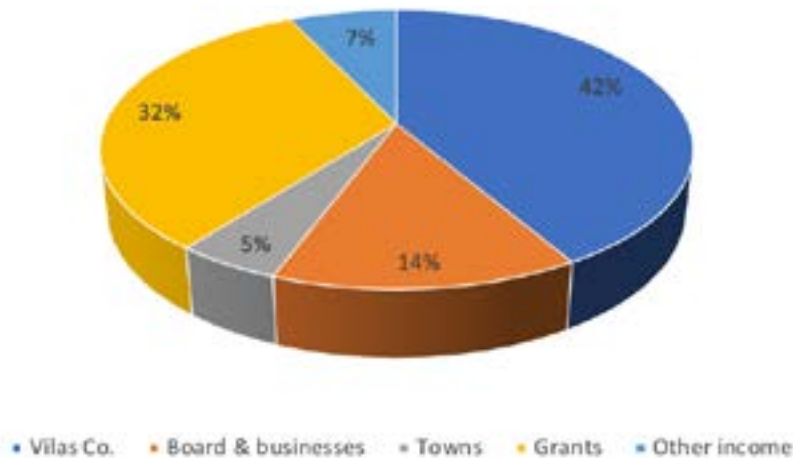


Phelps Redevelopment Bluff Project 180 Degree View

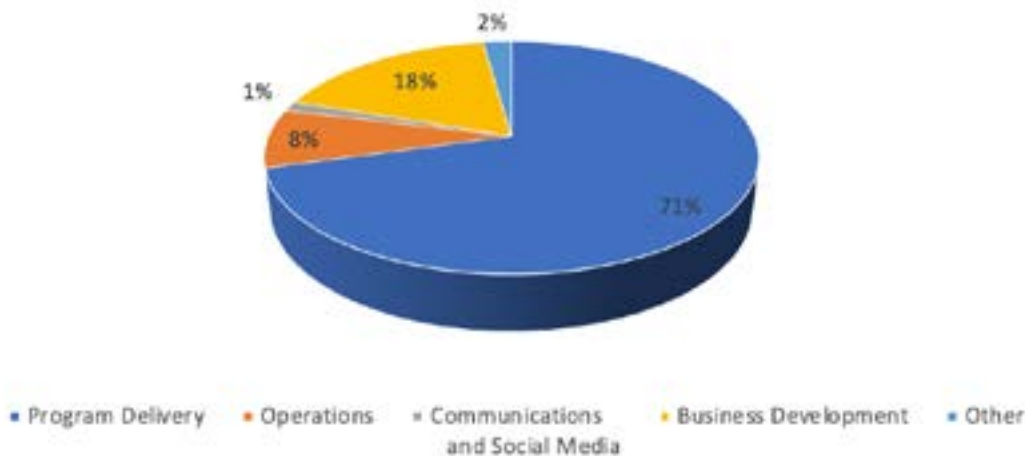
# Financial Report

Our financial health is strong thanks to the visionary leadership of our Board of Directors and the generous funding of our financial partners and donors. We're grateful for each investment of time, talent, and donations for our work!

Income



Expenses



"I joined the VCEDC Board in 2024 because the success of our community, our entrepreneurs, and our businesses is important to me. The VCEDC has a long history of doing great things that provide for the long-term viability of our business community, and I wanted to be a part of that."

*Erin McCormick*

Vice President Commercial Banker  
VCEDC Board Member/Officer



# 2024 Businesses of the Month

January



**EAGLE RIVER ANIMAL HOSPITAL**

Dr. Katie Hom  
Amber Plautz

March



**EAGLE RIVER OFFICE SUPPLY & COPY CENTER**

Rick Caudill, Kathy Schmitz,  
Ken Caudill

April



**BACKWOODS DCB**

Erik & Katie Paremski

May



**ROOTS - THE NORTHWOODS JUICE BAR**

Kathy Schmitz,  
Cortnee Pinski

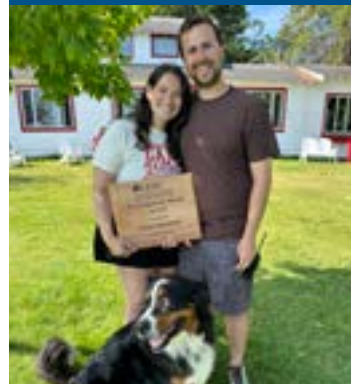
June



**NORTH LAKE LAND DISCOVERY CENTER**

Eric Koster, Kathy Schmitz,  
Jamie Vandenlangenberg

July



**CAMP MARIMETA**

Nick and Jami Kasle

August



**HEADWATER SERVICES**

Sean and Amy Thomason

September



**EAGLE RIVER PET COMPANY**

Josh and Ryli Dishno,  
Kathy Schmitz, "River"

October



**THE GUIDE'S INN**

Chef Jesse VanRossum,  
Kathy Schmitz

November



**MINOCQUA POPCORN & PUFFS**

Jim Gleich, Kathy Schmitz



## 2024 VCEDC Business of the Year Eagle River Animal Hospital

With a new state of the art facility and a growing staff of 19, the Eagle River Animal Hospital is enhancing the quality of care for pets, providing new services, and offering a more comfortable experience for animals and their owners.

“When you look back at 2024, one business stood out,” said Jim Tuckwell, VCEDC Board Chairman. “Owner Dr. Katie Hom had a vision to take veterinary care in Eagle River to the next level with the Eagle River Animal Hospital’s new modern, efficient 10,000 sq ft facility, which is serving pet owners from throughout the Northwoods, central Wisconsin, and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. After one year in its new facility, the Eagle River Animal Hospital is already exceeding growth targets, which is a testament to the quality of care that they provide.”

### Congratulations to Dr. Hom and the entire team at Eagle River Animal Hospital!

Eagle River Animal  
Hospital Business of the  
Year Video link:



Dr. Hom expressed her gratitude for the Business of the Year Award recognition:

“We are honored to receive the Business of the Year award for 2024! We hoped to create a professional, modern facility while preserving the warmth and compassion of our personalized care.

This recognition affirms that we didn’t just build a building, but a piece of the community that will continue to serve pets far into the future.”



# 2024 VCEDC Board of Directors

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Kathy Schmitz

**CHAIRMAN**

Jim Tuckwell

**VICE CHAIRMAN**

Richard Nelson

**TREASURER**

Jon Chamberlain

**SECRETARY**

Ty Erickson

**DIRECTORS**

Kelly Cooper

Emerson Coy

Brad Gauthier

William Keeler

Patty Krarup

Noah Lottig

Erin McCormick

Peter Mouw

Bill Niemuth

Carolyn Ritter

**EX-OFFICIO**

Kate Ferrel

Jim Rosenberg



Kathy Schmitz and Jim Tuckwell with Gretchen Gerrish, Director of Trout Lake Station in Boulder Junction.

Congrats to Trout Lake Station on 100 years of environmental research studying our fabulous Northwoods lakes and streams!





# You Can Be a Supporter

**At the Vilas County EDC, we make a measurable impact on the small business owners and entrepreneurs who drive our economy.**

**You can support our mission to build a stronger Northwoods economy!  
Here's how:**

- Make a monthly donation to sustain our work.
- Sponsor an educational or networking event by providing event space, materials, or entrees.
- Volunteer your time and business expertise as a speaker at a Lunch & Learn.
- Spread the word about the VCEDC across your social and professional networks, both digitally and in-person!
- Attend a VCEDC event this year to connect with and support Vilas County small business owners.

***Join us in making a positive difference in Vilas County in 2025!***  
**Contact Kathy today at [Kathy@VilasCountyEDC.org](mailto:Kathy@VilasCountyEDC.org) to learn more.**

“Nicolet College is ever eager to support and partner with the VCEDC. We each leverage our unique strengths to ensure a resilient Northwoods economy fueled by the entrepreneurial mindset. When you partner with VCEDC, you soon discover that 1 + 1 = endless possibilities. Our robust partnership has infused significant investment in Northwoods businesses via Small Business Administration funding, broadband expansion, tribal business development, and workforce training expressly designed to help entrepreneurs thrive.”

*Kate Ferrel*

President Nicolet College  
Ex-officio, VCEDC Board of Directors



Former Packers Running Back Dorsey Levens; Kathy Schmitz; VCEDC Board Member Patty Krarup.

Thank you to the Green Bay Packers Foundation for their generous grant to support of our 1-1 Small Business Consulting program!

## Connect with us:

Kathy Schmitz, Executive Director

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Eagle River, WI 54521

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[vilascounty.edc.org](http://vilascounty.edc.org)

[Kathy@VilasCountyEDC.org](mailto:Kathy@VilasCountyEDC.org)

