



Redeveloping for the

FUTURE



Written by Claire Suttles



With a growing economy and a range of redevelopment projects to enhance quality of life, the City of Wausau, Wisconsin is an ideal place to live, work, and play. “We have a great work-life balance here,” says Development Director Randy Fifrick. “Our outdoor tourism and recreation is really fabulous. We’ve got the Wisconsin River running through the city, Granite Peak [ski resort on] Rib Mountain, just a short, five-minute drive away, a lot of opportunities for hiking. And we have a really active off-road and on-road bicycle community,” he shares.

Wausau’s strategic location is another major plus. “We’re the gateway to the North,” Mayor Doug Diny says. “We’re the crossroads of commerce.” Highway 29 and Highway 51 intersect in the heart of the city, providing quick and easy access to other parts of the state. “It’s a perfect place, centrally located.” ►►





► The natural resources of the Wausau region create rich opportunities for business, a win for both the economy and locals looking to enjoy life. “The whole area is going all in on outdoor recreation. Local organizations are developing hundreds of miles of gravel biking routes throughout our rural areas. There will be new mountain biking trails on Rib Mountain State Park that will complement the other area trails, winter downhill and cross-country skiing, hiking, and much more—all about 20 minutes from downtown Wausau.”

Lake Wausau is another attraction that draws tourists and locals alike, and the community is working hard to maintain the popular resource. “We have a hundred-plus-year-old dam that needs to be repaired, and the paper mill is spending extra to not have to draw the lake down,” Mayor Diny explains. “We understand the amount of impact that has, not only on the people living around the lake, but what it draws in recreationally.”

Local leaders recognize the need to make Wausau a place that appeals to potential employees as well. “One of the things that we’ve realized is that, as the competition for workforce continues to grow, we need to be a place where people want to live and want to work,” says Fifrick. “People have more mobility than ever now to choose where they work, so having a place that people want to *live* first of all, and then finding a job, is

a lot easier than trying to do it the other way around. People have the mobility to choose where they want to work, so let’s give them a place where they want to live, and then they find the jobs here.”

This effort to improve the community includes a number of exciting redevelopment projects, one of which is the Wausau Center Mall. “The pandemic and everything associated with that was one of the final death blows to our regional mall site,” Fifrick says. “The mall was closed up at that point and redevelopment plans went into place.” The Wausau Opportunity Zone, a public-private partnership, is behind the project. The demolition is complete and the team is currently working on phase one with Middleton, Wisconsin-based developer, T. Wall Enterprises.

The finished project will include 153 residential units, underground parking, and first-floor retail. “We’ve been going through a lot of planning,” says Fifrick. “With such a large site, there is a lot to consider: how we reroute roads, utilities, and what kind of development we look for there. It’s a great project, hopefully a catalyst to the redevelopment of that mall area.”

The city’s riverfront is also getting a makeover. “The Wisconsin River in Wausau, like most of the Midwestern towns with a

large river, has been a working river for many years,” Fifrlick explains. “It was the center, where you would see a lot of industry over time. So we’ve been really trying to redevelop it for placemaking purposes to provide a better experience for citizens. We’ve been actively working with some of our businesses, our manufacturers, to move them out to our business campus, which allows for redevelopment along that riverfront area.”

The entire northeast side of the river has either been secured for redevelopment or is already undergoing remediation. There is a nearly completed trail, and soon there will be new housing. “We are working with a developer right now to add some additional residential units,” Fifrlick says. “We’re looking at a project for 144 units that will be right next to where we have another apartment complex.”

This existing complex, Riverlife Apartments, was featured in a 2016 **Business in Focus** article that profiled the first stages of the Wisconsin River redevelopment. “That was our first successful project down there,” Fifrlick says. “And just to the north of that, we built a park area with a food service area.” The city partnered with the state to create the park. “We’ve got a really cool playground area that draws in a lot of kids; the outdoor equipment out there is pretty fabulous,” he says. ►►

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► Located between the park and the apartment complex, WOW Family Entertainment Center offers laser tag, arcade games, and a full-service restaurant and bar. “It really complements the park quite well.”

“You have a need for housing because people are living fewer per house these days... we need to concentrate on the density, the smaller apartment style, and some smaller homes that would be more affordable for that smaller family.”



City leaders have worked diligently to see the river redevelopment through to its current point. “It’s really a process, to make something like that happen,” Fifrick shares. “With a working river like that, you have a lot of environmental cleanup to go through over the years. That’s been an ongoing battle, but we’re making progress, which is a good thing.”

Expanding the residential market is another goal for the city. “This is a big focus,” says Fifrick. “We have two different projects we’re working on right now that fall into the workforce or affordable housing category, both thanks to low-income housing tax credits.” Several market-rate housing projects are in the works as well, including a single-family residential subdivision in progress on the west side of town.



“We haven’t had a neighborhood-type development in quite some time because we are somewhat landlocked, so we’re limited in where we can place these,” Mayor Diny says. “We have to be creative with zoning, and we have to build up in the downtown area.”

The city recognizes demographic changes that are driving the need for more housing. “15 years ago, you had three and a half members per household,” Mayor Diny says. “Now we’re down to around 2.7 on average. So you don’t necessarily have a boom in population, but you have a need for housing because people are living fewer per house these days. So I think that indicates we need to concentrate on the density, the smaller apartment style, and maybe some smaller homes that would be more affordable for that smaller family.”

“If you go back to 2022, our regional planning commission put together a study that identified the housing needs in our area,” Fifrck tells us. “At that point, they projected we needed 525 new units in the area by 2025.” Things are moving along nicely, with nearly 500 units underway. “We’re making really good progress,” he says. “It’s just a matter of continuing to work toward that.”

Looking ahead, city leaders plan to draw more industry to the area. “We need to focus on attracting businesses here,” says Mayor Diny. “If we can get the jobs—and the high-paying jobs, the technology jobs—that will drive the rest of the economy.”

“We’re working on that right now with our business campus,” adds Fifrck. “We’re really looking at the inventory we have and what we can fit on some of those parcels where we have land

available for development. We’re the only city in Marathon County that has a WEDC-certified site; WEDC is our state agency for economic development.”

The campus can accommodate smaller manufacturing companies that require just a few acres as well as larger businesses, particularly those that align with city goals. “We’re really trying to lure those high-tech jobs that people are going to be needed for in the long term,” Fifrck says. “We’re really focusing in and making sure the companies we’re bringing are long lasting.”

This forward-looking mindset is helping Wausau reinvent itself—from the mall and riverfront redevelopments to expanding housing and strong business recruitment strategies. The result is a city poised to attract new companies with the talent and families who will make Wausau a great place to live, work, and play. ■

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