

STATE OF DOWNTOWN WISCONSIN



Images: Top, La Crosse and bottom, Madison

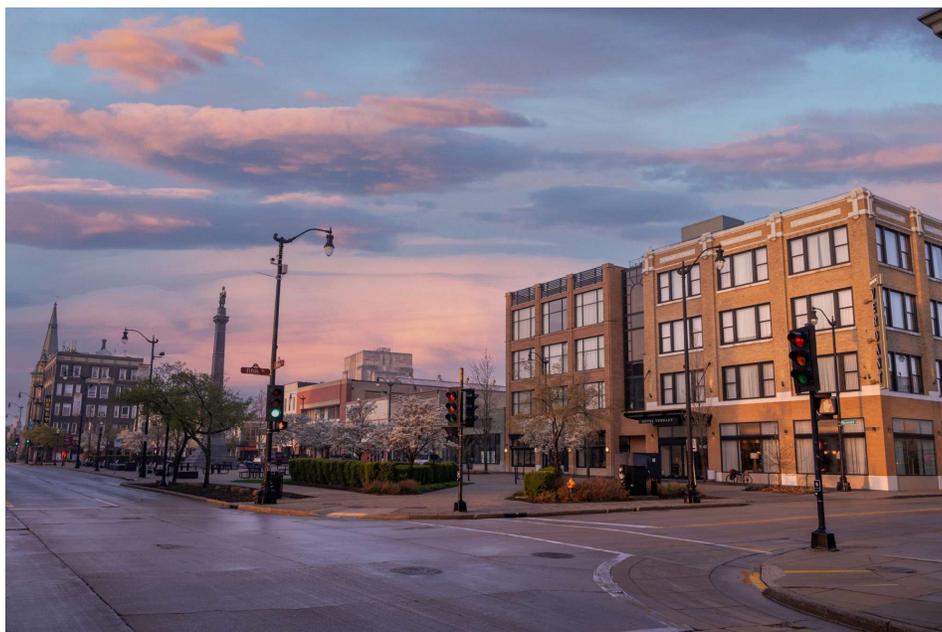
The State of Wisconsin Downtowns

2025 Trends Report

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Introduction

Downtowns are the heart and soul of Wisconsin cities. They attract people from across the state as well as beyond state lines. Downtowns in Wisconsin serve as the economic, cultural, and social core of their communities. They are not only centers for commerce and entrepreneurship but also vibrant social hubs where residents and visitors gather for shared experience. From Milwaukee to La Crosse, and from Green Bay to Eau Claire, downtowns across Wisconsin are evolving into true neighborhoods that reflect the unique character of their cities, not just central business districts, but vital community centers.

The story of downtowns in Wisconsin is one of reinvention. Whether from manufacturing hub to healthcare hub or rural farm town to tourism hotspot, downtowns evolve along with their communities. These spaces represent more than just a place to shop and dine, but also a center of shared cultural values. Throughout Wisconsin, communities are taking steps to shape the future of their downtowns through thoughtful planning and bold leadership. As a result of collective efforts, Wisconsin's downtowns can continue to grow as vital, inclusive, and thriving centers for their cities, regions, and the state as a whole.



Image: downtown La Crosse



Image: downtown Platteville

Methodology

The *State of Wisconsin Downtowns* study is based on a similar nationwide study by the International Downtown Association (IDA), highlighting economic trends and growth patterns across the types of communities served by the Wisconsin Main Street program. Each community is as unique as its residents, and is thriving in its own way, although communities can use this comparative information to help chart a path to continued growth.

As in the IDA study, Wisconsin downtowns were classified into categories of *emerging*, *growing*, and *established*, although these categories look different for our relatively smaller cities in Wisconsin. Criteria included rate of growth, citywide Classification criteria include share of residents and jobs, density of residents, and assessed value per square mile.

The study identified five key principles—*economy*, *people*, *housing*, *vibrancy*, and *resilience*—and analyzed more than 50 key metrics within the principles to quantify the value of a given Wisconsin downtown. The study relied on public and proprietary data sources as well as data collection. Metrics included change over time, per square mile and by share of city and regional value, measuring each downtown against its respective city and others in the same tier.



Image: downtown Milwaukee



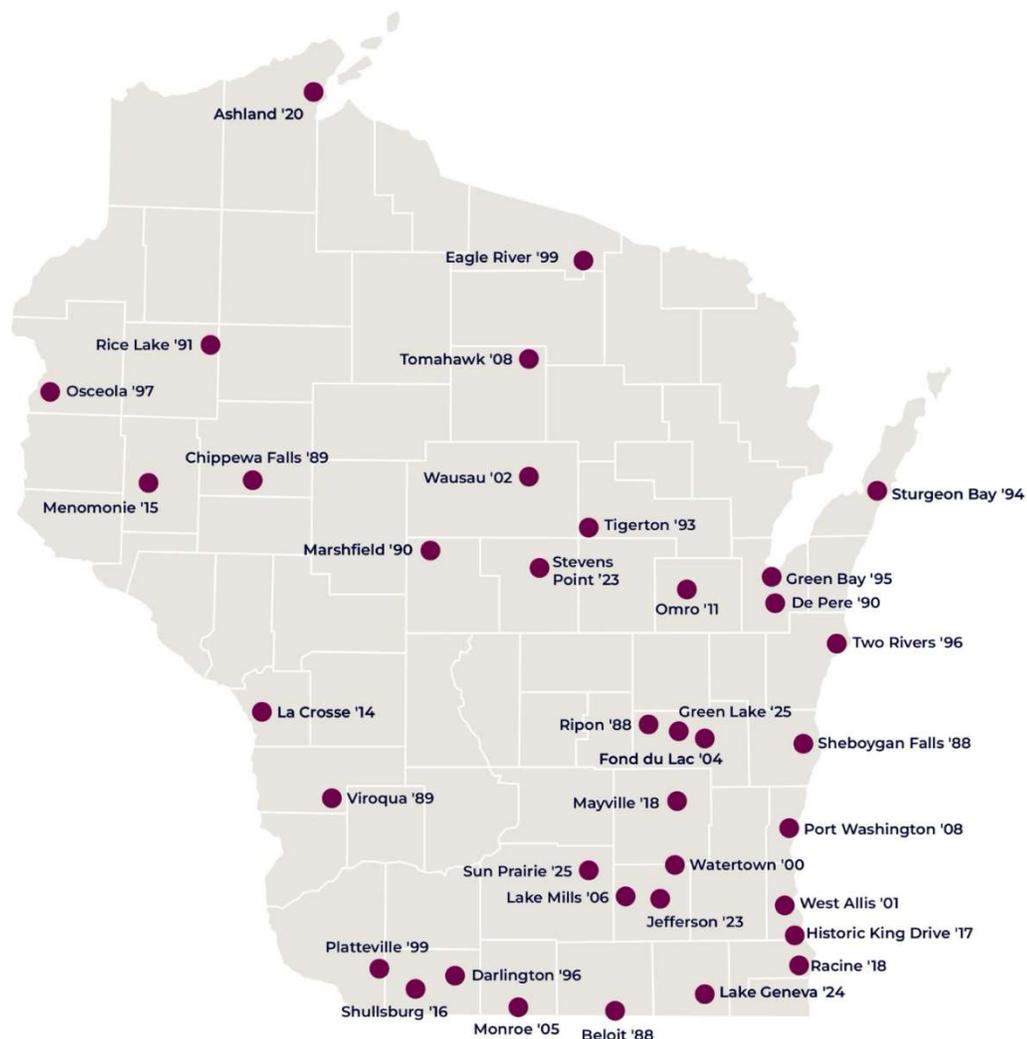
Image: downtown Milwaukee



Image: downtown Green Bay

Main Street Communities

We studied forty-one communities associated with Main Street across the State of Wisconsin. They are a part of a comprehensive revitalization program designed to promote the historic and economic redevelopment of traditional business districts. These downtowns provide a wholistic view of cities across Wisconsin, and show differences in population, income, and other important metrics. Also included in the report are the four aspiring Main Street communities currently participating in the Main Street application cohort; Beaver Dam, Waupun, Eau Claire and Janesville.



Downtown Categories

The forty-one downtowns were broken down into three different classes per the previously discussed criteria. This classification helps in analyzing the stage of downtown growth for each city, which can be useful for planning, investment decisions, and evaluating potential for future development. In many ways, population is a key factor influencing the built environment of a downtown, and communities may find it helpful to compare themselves to other communities within their tier.

Emerging Downtowns

These cities are in the early stages of downtown revitalization. They may be making initial investments, planning improvements, or just beginning to attract new businesses and visitors. Cities in this category include:

Ashland, Darlington, Eagle River, Green Lake, Jefferson, Lake Mills, Mayville, Menomonie, Omro, Osceola, Rice Lake, Shullsburg, Tigerton, Tomahawk, and Two Rivers

Growing Downtowns

Cities in this group have made noticeable progress in downtown development. Their downtowns are likely experiencing rising foot traffic, increased business presence, and physical or economic revitalization. These cities are:

Beaver Dam, Beloit, Chippewa Falls, Fond du Lac, Lake Geneva, Marshfield, Monroe, Platteville, Ripon, Sheboygan Falls, Stevens Point, Sun Prairie, Viroqua, and Waupun

Established Downtowns

These cities feature well-developed, highly active downtown areas. They often serve as commercial and cultural hubs within their regions, with a dense presence of businesses, events, and amenities. Included in this tier are:

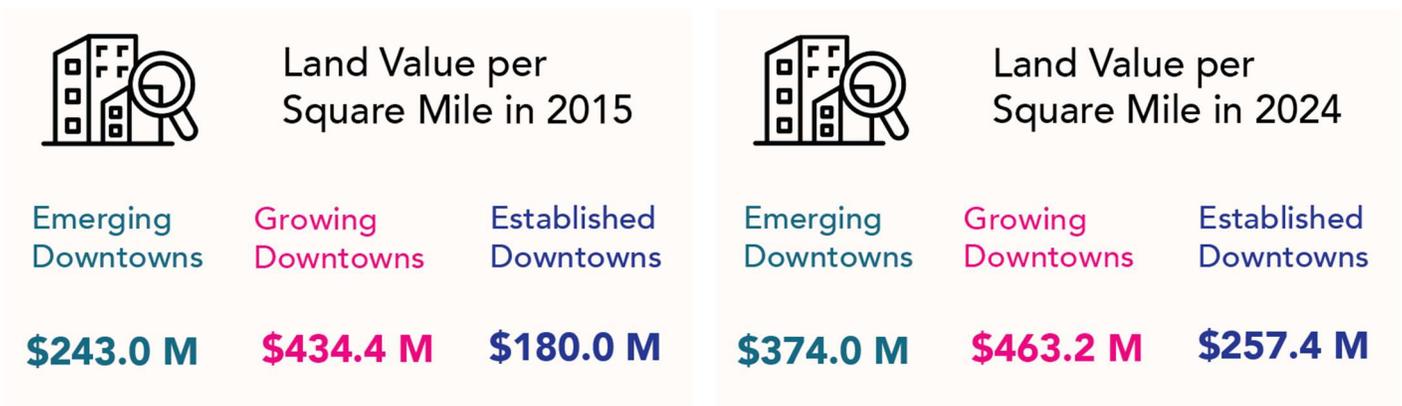
De Pere, Eau Claire, Green Bay, Janesville, La Crosse, Historic King Drive, Port Washington, Racine, Sturgeon Bay, Watertown, Wausau, and West Allis

Economy

Downtowns in Wisconsin have long been vital hubs of regional activity and central to the financial well-being of municipalities. As focal points for employment, development, and cultural identity, they naturally attract a concentration of valuable real estate. This strong appeal helps make downtowns key contributors to local tax bases, which support essential public services. Despite the presence of institutional, nonprofit, and government buildings that typically are not taxed, downtown areas still serve as financial anchors for their communities.

Traditionally serving as business and commercial centers, the changing shape of the Wisconsin economy has impacted traffic patterns. Some larger communities now face new challenges due to shifts in workplace trends, including a decline in daily office attendance, while others benefit from increased work-from-home populations now present in the district. Still, these areas continue to be critical employment centers for cities and regions throughout the state. In many places, downtowns host a significant share of the city’s jobs, as small businesses collectively employ large numbers of individuals.

Over a nearly ten-year period between 2015 and 2024, Monroe, Ripon, and Wausau have seen the largest growth in their assessed land values. Monroe is particularly notable, with over \$193 million in increased land value. Across all three downtown categories, our communities have increased their land values by around 50% since 2014. *Emerging* communities are growing the fastest, with their land values increasing 54% on average.



Source: Wisconsin Department of Revenue

Economy



Number of Blocks in District

 National Average	26
 Emerging	19
 Growing	31
 Established	33



Downtown Employees

Emerging	Growing	Established
508	1,704	1,801
		



Businesses

 Emerging	120
 Growing	322
 Established	900



Retail Businesses

Emerging	28
Growing	63
Established	70

Sources: Data Axle, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, International Downtown Association (national average)

Economy

Across Wisconsin, these forty-one downtowns represent a powerful story of transformation and local momentum. From towns just starting their downtown revitalization to those with well-established cities, the data shows how communities evolve through distinct stages of growth.

Emerging downtowns, averaging just nineteen blocks, are in the early stages of development, or represent small communities. With an average of five-hundred-and-eight downtown employees, one-hundred-twenty businesses, and twenty-eight retail establishments, they are laying the groundwork for future vibrancy. Yet they already attract a remarkable 24.7% of their city's visitors downtown—a sign that change is sparking interest and drawing attention even in its early phases.

In *growing* communities, the progress is more visible. With thirty-one blocks, over one-thousand-seven-hundred employees, and three-hundred-twenty-two businesses, these towns are rapidly expanding their economic base. Notably, they host sixty-three retail businesses, nearly as many as more mature peers, suggesting focused investment in consumer-friendly spaces. They also see 21.6% of city visitors downtown, showing strong engagement with both locals and tourists.

At the top, *established* communities reflect years of sustained effort. Averaging thirty-three blocks, they support one-thousand-eight-hundred-seven employees and a robust nine-hundred businesses, including seventy retail shops. Though only 14.5% of city visitors go downtown—likely because of competition with other districts and destinations in the community—their scale and stability speak to a lasting impact.

Together, these numbers tell a clear story: Wisconsin's Main Street program is helping communities grow from potential to prosperity. Whether just *emerging* or long *established*, each city plays a vital role in strengthening its local economy and sense of place.



People

Downtowns and urban districts welcome residents, visitors and workers to meet and connect in both work and play. Downtown residents tend to be young, racially diverse and well-educated; generally, between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, a trend which has accelerated in recent years as interest in downtown living among students and young professionals has driven population growth in center cities.

Socioeconomically, downtown residents are generally more highly educated. This may be explained by the prevalence of younger, early career residents and higher concentrations of low-income households than other parts of the city.

Emerging, growing, and established downtowns average roughly a quarter of their population as degree holders over the age of twenty-five. Downtown communities associated with colleges and universities are often outliers. De Pere for example – home of St. Norbert College – has a population that is nearly 40%-degree holders over the age of twenty-five. Similarly, several studied downtowns have established medical centers, which also attract highly educated individuals with a desire to live near work.



Percentage of
Degree Holders
25+

Emerging	22.51%
Growing	26.46%
Established	28.83%

Source: American Community Survey

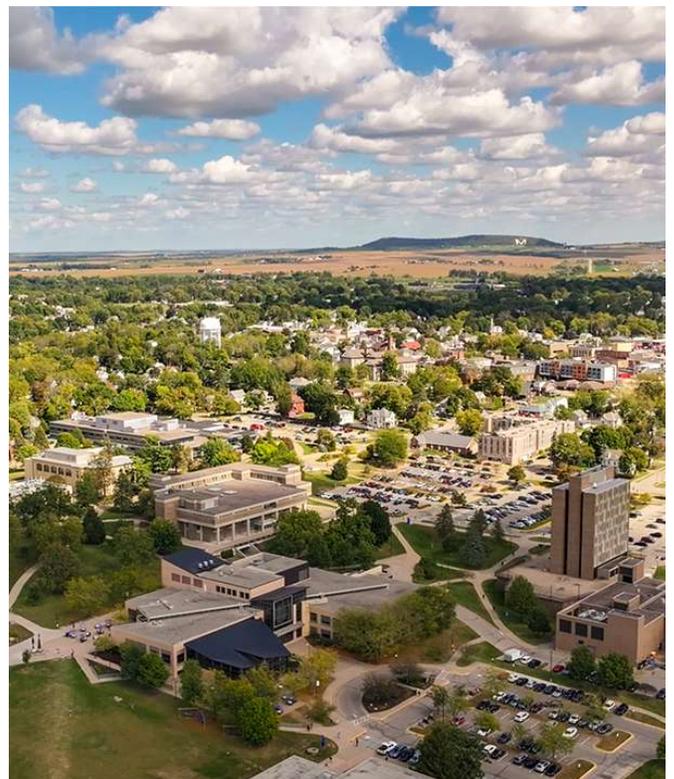


Image: downtown Platteville, University of Wisconsin-Platteville

People

Downtown households are predominantly homeowners—in WEDC’s study districts, 58% of households own their home, compared to just 51% nationally. There are exceptions to this rule, but few, in both downtown Platteville and Historic King Drive, most households rent their home. Generally, it is unusual for downtown households to have more than a 70% rate of homeownership, which corresponds to similar national homeownership statistics. This speaks to the stable nature of downtowns in Wisconsin.



Homeownership

	National Average	51%
	Emerging	61%
	Growing	57%
	Established	56%

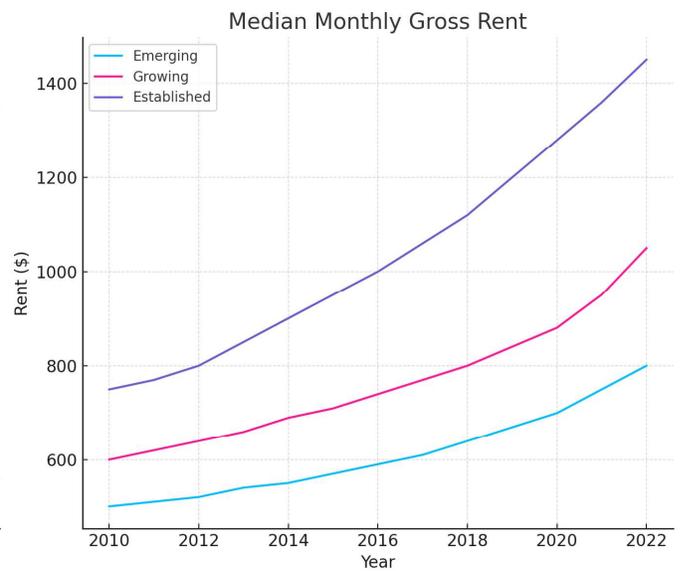
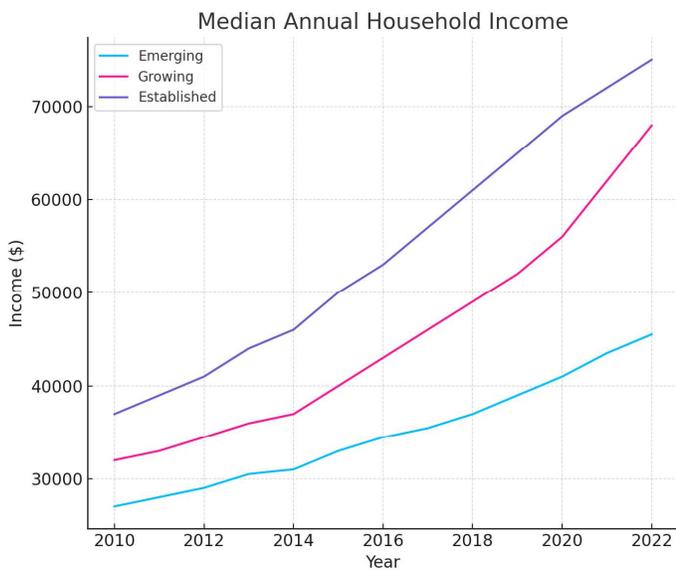
Sources: American Community Survey, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, International Downtown Association (national average)



Image: downtown Milwaukee

People

This chart compares average rent and average income across *National Average, Emerging, Growing, and Established* communities. The visual shows that: *emerging* communities have the lowest rent but the highest income, *growing* and *established* communities have relatively moderate rent levels and similar income levels, and national averages show the highest rent in comparison to these community categories. This visualization highlights how *emerging* areas might offer the best affordability in terms of rent-to-income ratio.



Average Income

National Average	\$50,935
Emerging	\$64,093
Growing	\$59,118
Established	\$59,699

Downtown Average Rent

National Average	\$1,625
Emerging	\$981
Growing	\$1,105
Established	\$1,288

Sources: American Community Survey, Data Axel, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, International Downtown Association (national average)

Housing

Incomes have risen in both downtown and the city but rent increases downtown have outpaced those across the rest of the city. Rents in all tiers are increasing, but those in *growing* downtowns are increasing the fastest.

Housing affordability is a critical issue in downtowns (as in communities overall), and increasing the supply of housing in downtowns to meet the high demand for downtown living is critical to ensuring that downtowns and center cities provide options for everyone, especially for service sector employees.

Additionally, increasing the variety of housing types can increase options such as micro-units or condominiums, both of which are generally lacking but in high demand based on consumer surveys.

Currently, *emerging* downtowns average two-hundred-ninety-nine units. *Growing* downtowns have around four-hundred-sixty units. And *established* downtowns boast five-hundred-ninety-seven residential units. This displays the integral role housing plays in the development of downtown communities.



Downtown Residential Units

Emerging	299
Growing	460
Established	597

Sources: Data Axle, Zillow Group



Image: downtown Racine

Vibrancy

Downtowns are the heart of the community, hosting events and serving as the go-to impromptu gathering place for all ages and backgrounds. Per the IDA study, nationally the ratio of workers per resident shrink from 6 workers per resident to four over the past two decades. In Wisconsin, the ratio varies greatly, ranging from 3 employees per resident in districts with more vacant upper floors and lots to 5-10 residents per employee in districts with more fully utilized properties, especially communities with universities. Residents are an important ingredient of evening and weekend traffic.

Similarly, a supply of steady foot traffic is an important ingredient of business success. Geofencing data shows average yearly foot traffic in the millions for downtown communities in Wisconsin. In contrast with other data, *emerging* downtowns have outpaced both *growing* and *established* downtowns in visitations. In Wisconsin, about a quarter of all foot traffic in *emerging* communities was to the downtown area. This likely represents the unique nature of Wisconsin downtowns and their link to recreation and seasonal tourism.



Average Yearly Foot Traffic

Emerging	2,495,394
Growing	1,888,269
Established	1,375,732

Percentage of City Visitors going Downtown

Emerging	24.7%
Growing	21.6%
Established	14.5%

Source: Datafy, WEDC

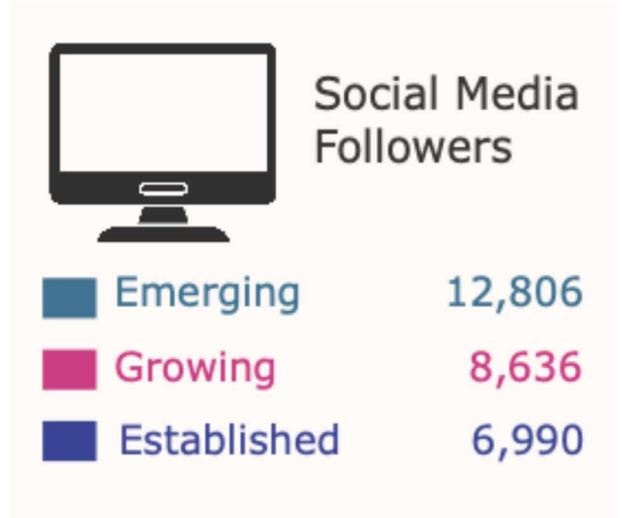


Images: Top, downtown Menomonie; Bottom, downtown Madison

Vibrancy

Social media has become an important tool in marketing downtowns to patrons and business partners. Downtown communities that operate active Facebook and Instagram profiles are able to broadcast themselves to a far wider audience without geographic constraints. Consistent posting and interactions with online members of the downtown area allows Wisconsin's downtowns to increase their visibility with nearly no additional cost to administrators.

Across Main Street Wisconsin's downtowns, *emerging* communities have outpaced both *growing* and *established* communities' number of Facebook and Instagram users. As a newer tool for attracting business to downtown, social media is likely used more vigorously by *emerging* communities seeking to strengthen their brand. Many *established* Wisconsin downtowns have long been staples of their region, making the benefits of social media less apparent. As social media's value continues to increase, downtowns should continue to grow their internet footprint.



Sources: Facebook, Instagram



Image: downtown Sun Prairie

Vibrancy

While downtowns are economically critical to communities, they serve a far greater role in fostering a sense of community and shared identity for locals. The cultural, recreational and entertainment assets currently existing and being planned for Wisconsin’s downtowns are not just central to the identity of the city and region—but serve as key magnets and anchors for downtown.

Asset-rich downtowns support thriving communities. Across *emerging*, *growing*, and *established* downtowns, districts with ample resources support robust and growing city populations.

Similarly, unemployment in Wisconsin communities with thriving downtowns is well below the national average. No downtown category has above a 3% unemployment rate. Some downtown communities, such as Lake Mills and Sturgeon Bay have below a 2% unemployment rate. Wisconsin downtowns lead the way in population development and employment.



Population Average

Emerging	5,433
Growing	16,788
Established	97,900

Source: United States Census



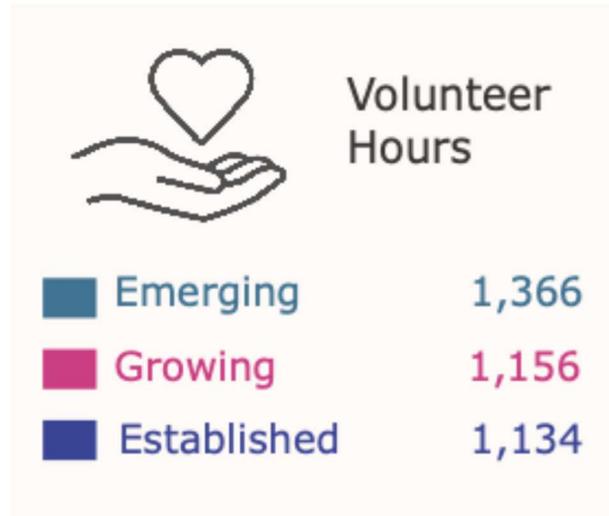
Unemployment

National Average	4.00
Emerging	2.77
Growing	2.99
Established	2.81

Source: United States Census, International Downtown Association (national average)

Vibrancy

Volunteerism symbolizes the strength of a community by showing the willingness of ordinary citizens to provide for one another. Wisconsin downtowns display an impressive amount of volunteer hours across *emerging*, *growing*, and *established*. Nearly every reporting downtown boasts one-thousand volunteer hours over the previous year. Standout communities include Ashland, Lake Mills, Stevens Point, Green Bay, and Port Washington; all of whom have over two-thousand volunteer hours recorded. Volunteer hours are especially important in smaller communities, allowing them to achieve more with less financial investment.



Source: Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation



Image: downtown Eau Claire

Resilience

Downtowns facilitate a walkable lifestyle with a high quality of life, creating opportunities for individuals to live, work, and recreate without the need for commuting. This multi-use lifestyle allows residents to create deeper connections with a place, building political support for further investment. This proximity requires a healthy mix of uses and public space amenities in a district, and is also complemented by a network of pedestrian, biking and (sometimes) transit infrastructure.

In their commute to work, downtown residents are far more likely to walk, bike or take transit to work, a testament to the mixed-use nature of downtowns. As a result, downtown households have a much smaller greenhouse gas footprint than other U.S. households. A typical downtown household produces less than half the CO2 emissions of their regional counterparts.

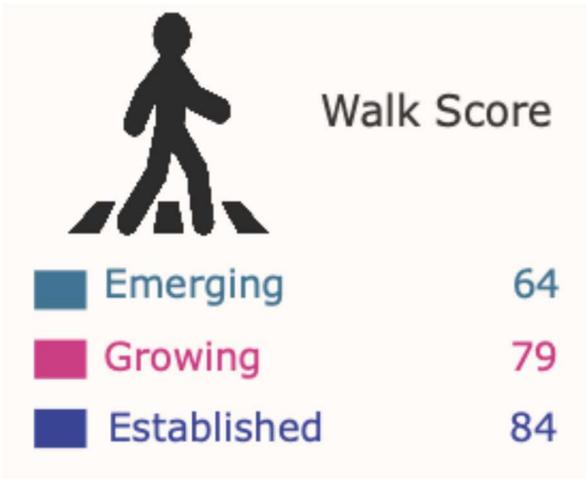
 **Downtown residents**
are **4x more likely**
to walk to work

Source: The International Downtown Association

Downtowns are places of reinvention. Most downtowns have bounced back from fires, floods, and/or the departure of anchor industries. By being walkable and supporting a mix of uses that meet the daily needs of residents, downtowns foster a sustainable lifestyle that cater to all demographics, whether young professionals hoping to take advantage of nightlife opportunities in a safe environment, young families exploring with children or older adults seeking a car-free lifestyle.

Resilience

Wisconsin downtowns are exceptionally walkable and bikeable. Compared to other municipalities and Wisconsin downtowns' wider cities, our communities allow for pedestrians and cyclists to explore their districts without a car. Density of housing and business is vital to the resilience of downtowns and key to their unique atmosphere. Across Wisconsin and the U.S., the value of a walkable and bikeable community as a means of community and economic development has become increasingly apparent. High bike-ability and walkability increase the attractiveness of downtowns across demographics. Walkable and bikeable downtowns are simply where people want to be.



Source: Walk Score

Across Wisconsin's downtown communities, walk score and bike score are directly proportionate to whether a community is *emerging*, *growing*, or *established*. *Established* downtowns have built up an infrastructure more conducive to a pedestrian or a cyclist. This usually includes pedestrian malls, separated bicycle lanes, and automobile traffic calming measures such as speed bumps and signage. *Growing* and *emerging* communities are often still developing these measures in their downtown districts. Making downtowns a safe, open space where people can freely transit between businesses and blocks develops inviting districts distinct from other parts of the city.

STATE OF DOWNTOWN WISCONSIN



Downtown Residents

Emerging	609
Growing	1,160
Established	2,434



Land Value Growth Rate

Emerging	53.8%
Growing	48.1%
Established	43.1%



City Visitors also Visiting Downtown

Emerging	24.7%
Growing	20.4%
Established	14.5%



Trips to Downtown

Emerging	2,369,789
Growing	1,981,518
Established	1,375,732

Sources: American Community Survey, Data Axle, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, Placer.ai

Conclusion

Downtowns have always been, and will remain, vital anchors of community commerce and identity. Changing consumer values and economic patterns have created an opportunity to focus on prioritizing the adaptive reuse of vacant spaces and sites as locations for new housing options and public gathering spaces, complementing a backdrop of businesses and civic entities providing goods and services that support a healthy and thriving demographic. Continued leadership is needed to capitalize on emerging trends to continue to redefine the downtown experience for the next generation. Given the economic challenges facing many communities, visionary leaders will recognize the opportunities created by investment in downtowns as municipality’s largest economic engine. However, growth does not happen without leadership and support, and it targeted investment will be needed to leverage private investment in Wisconsin’s downtowns.

Wisconsin downtowns should strive to grow and transition relative to their peer communities. Downtowns that focus on areas where they lag their peer communities can chart a path toward sustainable growth. Key metrics to watch include business and residential density, district geographic size, and connectivity. Larger downtowns ample housing and commercial space that are exceptionally walkable and bikeable are not only more economically prosperous but also tend to support communities that are growing at a faster pace. Wisconsin downtowns can focus on supporting entrepreneurs, establishing second floor housing, emphasize in-fill development, and maintaining pedestrian friendly streets and vibrant public spaces.



STATE OF DOWNTOWN WISCONSIN

Key Data Points

Status	Community	Downtown Square Mileage (mi ²)	DT Employees	DT Businesses	DT Retail Est.	DT Resid. Units	Average Yearly Foot Traffic	Total Assessed Value 2024	Avg. Monthly Resid. Rent	Average HH Income	Walk Score	Bike Score
Emerging	Ashland	0.06	624	161	41	160	744,695	\$ 21,724,900	\$ 331	\$ 49,258	73	80
	Darlington	0.1	378	104	16	77	3,425,027	\$ 98,081,700	\$ 901	\$ 62,695	56	61
	Eagle River	1.49	372	91	22	219	2,800,826	\$ 146,906,800	\$ 1,095	\$ 52,027	59	50
	Green Lake	0.07	21	32	10	33	432,400	\$ 24,241,500	\$ 1,600	\$ 68,757	46	43
	Jefferson	0.17	496	157	35	185	929,289	\$ 97,767,700	\$ 924	\$ 79,256	79	58
	Lake Mills	0.05	291	94	25	19	2,333,973	\$ 50,542,500	\$ 1,500	\$ 87,039	71	55
	Mayville	0.1	289	77	20	76	1,566,004	\$ 44,934,500	\$ 975	\$ 66,453	67	58
	Menomonie	0.08	629	142	18	2,101	5,118,843	\$ 19,479,900	\$ 1,250	\$ 54,587	83	69
	Oscoda	0.06	1,331	297	83	225	2,463,187	\$ 18,085,400	\$ 1,100	\$ 64,500	67	33
	Rice Lake	0.14	729	216	43	333	1,650,340	\$ 133,675,500	\$ 1,050	\$ 55,900	72	67
	Shullsburg	0.03	730	22	4	43	4,983,498	\$ 110,209,700	\$ 850	\$ 68,900	59	36
	Tigerton	0.03	21	7	3	82	3,049,135	\$ 106,824,700	\$ 800	\$ 69,400	24	41
	Tomahawk	0.02	206	66	28	73	878,916	\$ 3,822,500	\$ 1,000	\$ 59,100	68	51
	Two Rivers	0.26	1,359	189	43	244	862,532	\$ 18,177,500	\$ 1,050	\$ 62,500	76	54
	Growing	Beaver Dam	0.21	1,604	38	8	1,076	1,200,000	\$ 46,003,800	\$ 1,125	\$ 68,757	81
Beloit		0.2	1,795	298	35	234	2,505,836	\$ 41,484,800	\$ 1,070	\$ 59,975	79	70
Chippewa Falls		0.23	1,587	407	87	369	836,879	\$ 112,990,900	\$ 1,175	\$ 62,133	82	58
Fond du Lac		0.28	3,733	734	120	1,081	2,090,923	\$ 20,253,900	\$ 1,060	\$ 61,620	90	66
Lake Geneva		0.09	840	183	64	96	6,200,011	\$ 66,535,600	\$ 1,600	\$ 73,199	77	70
Marshfield		0.17	1,576	298	62	2,103	1,906,394	\$ 24,241,500	\$ 900	\$ 59,294	86	70
Monroe		0.12	1,910	342	48	320	645,342	\$ 421,361,800	\$ 1,050	\$ 61,200	88	54
Platteville		0.1	774	175	57	443	2,986,258	\$ 7,921,200	\$ 1,200	\$ 38,900	87	52
Ripon		0.11	1,035	184	40	149	1,307,607	\$ 448,142,800	\$ 1,000	\$ 63,800	60	59
Sheboygan Falls		0.01	2,912	493	134	124	1,773,389	\$ 40,764,200	\$ 1,100	\$ 65,300	73	60
Sun Prairie		0.27	481	87	15	6,556	1,189,909	\$ 19,602,700	\$ 1,100	\$ 47,200	74	65
Stevens Point		0.29	1,972	308	23	206	1,189,909	\$ 19,602,700	\$ 1,100	\$ 47,200	74	65
Viroqua		0.04	960	256	40	147	352,143	\$ 13,622,200	\$ 950	\$ 54,300	76	61
Waupun		0.08	1,089	76	20	714	755,200	\$ 13,276,000	\$ 727	\$ 66,931	68	46
Established		De Pere	0.15	1,267	259	40	434	340,979	\$ 70,291,100	\$ 1,500	\$ 80,550	85
	Eau Claire	0.49	10,202	650	136	1,258	5,100,000	\$ 362,874,900	\$ 975	\$ 69,475	87	88
	Green Bay	0.35	1,648	236	52	412	2,116,515	\$ 130,740,900	\$ 1,499	\$ 62,546	79	92
	Janesville	0.47	1,114	167	30	784	3,300,000	\$ 132,178,200	\$ 1,250	\$ 66,615	89	76
	La Crosse	0.42	1,000	5,961	151	1,135	2,130,992	\$ 21,024,400	\$ 995	\$ 53,803	87	99
	Milwaukee	0.55	4,063	689	69	1,498	93,888	\$ 67,439,400	\$ 1,552	\$ 51,388	89	75
	Port Washington	0.16	1,674	234	45	135	303,550	\$ 9,279,100	\$ 1,180	\$ 65,700	67	52
	Racine	0.31	2,707	442	92	772	2,255,426	\$ 35,481,800	\$ 1,300	\$ 49,600	90	71
	Sturgeon Bay	0.45	2,305	464	105	241	563,500	\$ 105,645,100	\$ 1,200	\$ 58,700	73	50
	Watertown	0.19	956	231	35	356	3,022,045	\$ 44,259,100	\$ 1,100	\$ 60,400	87	56
	Wausau	0.19	1,732	326	60	205	1,752,274	\$ 167,386,000	\$ 1,200	\$ 60,200	88	75
	West Allis	0.03	658	157	49	778	1,178,147	\$ 69,307,700	\$ 1,350	\$ 54,100	88	52

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*Note that because of the way medical professionals are licensed, each individual often appears as an independent business, increasing the number of recorded businesses in some districts, especially La Crosse, where medical facilities are concentrated.

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