

*Downtown Development*

# STATE OF DOWNTOWN WISCONSIN



Images: Top, La Crosse and bottom, Madison

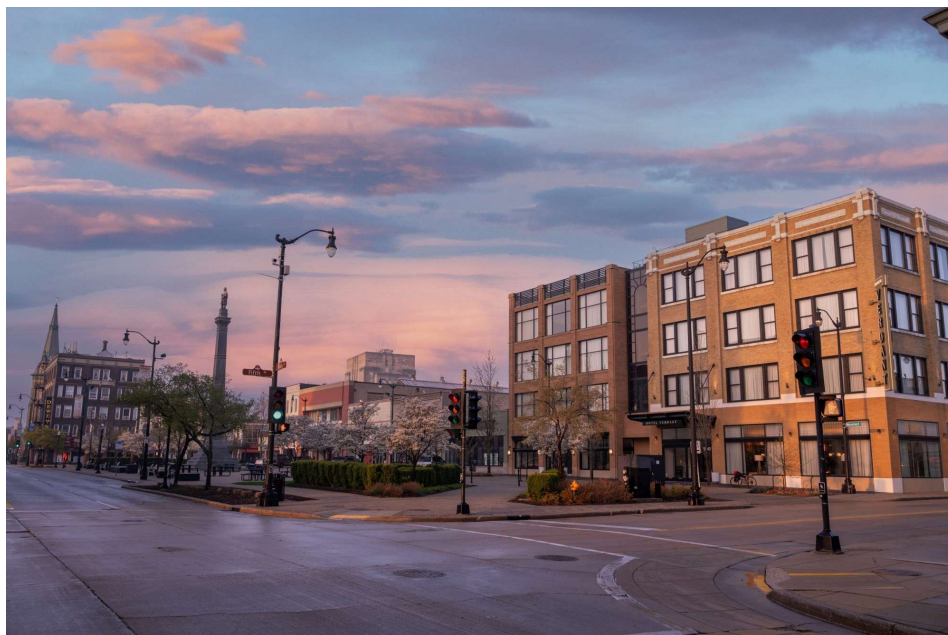
## The State of Wisconsin Downtowns

2025 Trends Report

## Contents



Pg 3 .....	Introduction
Pg 4 .....	Methodology
Pg 6 .....	Main Street Communities
Pg 7.....	Downtown Categories
Pg 8.....	Economy
Pg 11.....	People
Pg 14.....	Housing
Pg 15.....	Vibrancy
Pg 19.....	Resilience
Pg 22.....	Conclusion
Pg 23.....	Data Table
Pg 24.....	References



## 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. Most Wisconsinites rely heavily on their downtowns for shopping, socialization, and local identity. From Milwaukee to La Crosse, and from Green Bay to Eau Claire, downtowns across Wisconsin are evolving into neighborhoods that reflect the unique character of their cities, not just central business districts, but vital community spaces.

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 Downtown* 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. Classification criteria include share of residents and jobs, density of residents, and assessed value per square mile.

Borrowing from the IDA’s study, this research uses the same key principles—*economy*, *vibrancy*, and *resilience* while also focusing on *people* and *housing*, with findings complimented by more than 50 key metrics within the principles to quantify the intrinsic and economic contributions of a given Wisconsin downtown. The study relied on public and proprietary data sources as well as primary data collection from participating communities.

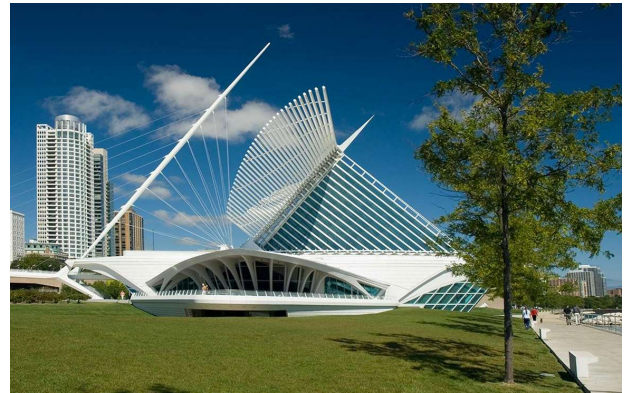


Image: downtown Milwaukee



Image: downtown Milwaukee



Image: downtown Green Bay

## Methodology

The Data collection process for the *State of Wisconsin Downtown* study was a multifaceted search that included an ad hoc but reliable array of sources. While this report relies structurally and rhetorically on the IDA report, the bulk of the raw data was collected in-house by WEDC. Exceptions include some but not all of the national average data. Where data was collected from the IDA report, it is noted in the infographic citation.

Where possible, this report gathered data from the U.S. Census’ decennial census and American Community Survey (ACS). A considerable amount of data was also collected from existing sources within WEDC. Main Street and Connect Communities report data annually and provide key insights into local trends that larger sources seldom look at.

Additional private data sources include *Data Axle*, *Zillow*, *Meta*, *Redfin*, and *Datafy*. These sources were able to fill in the gaps where public and in-house services fell short. This was especially true when tracking property and business data beyond what the U.S. Census provided.



Image: downtown Ashland



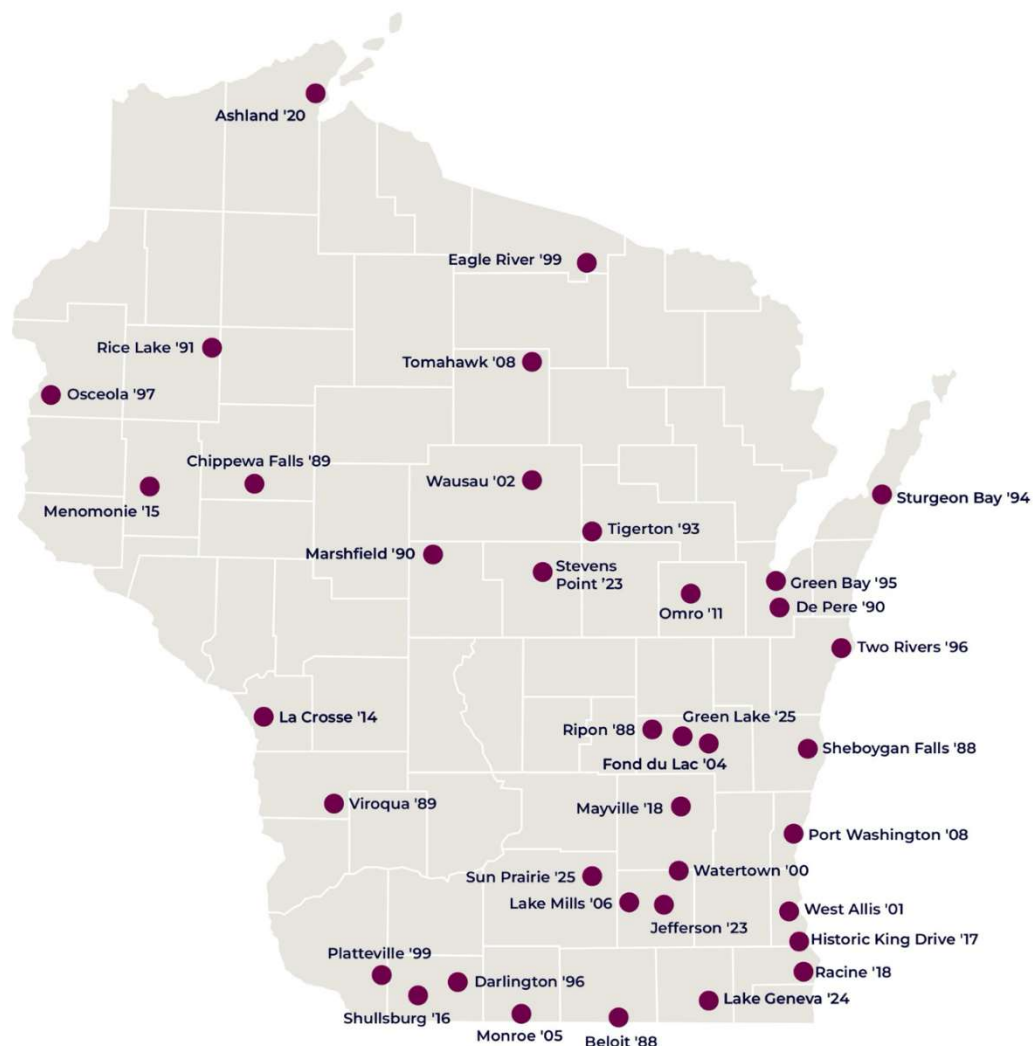
Image: downtown Sturgeon Bay



Image: downtown Lake Geneva

## Main Street Communities

We studied 41 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 41 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.

### **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:

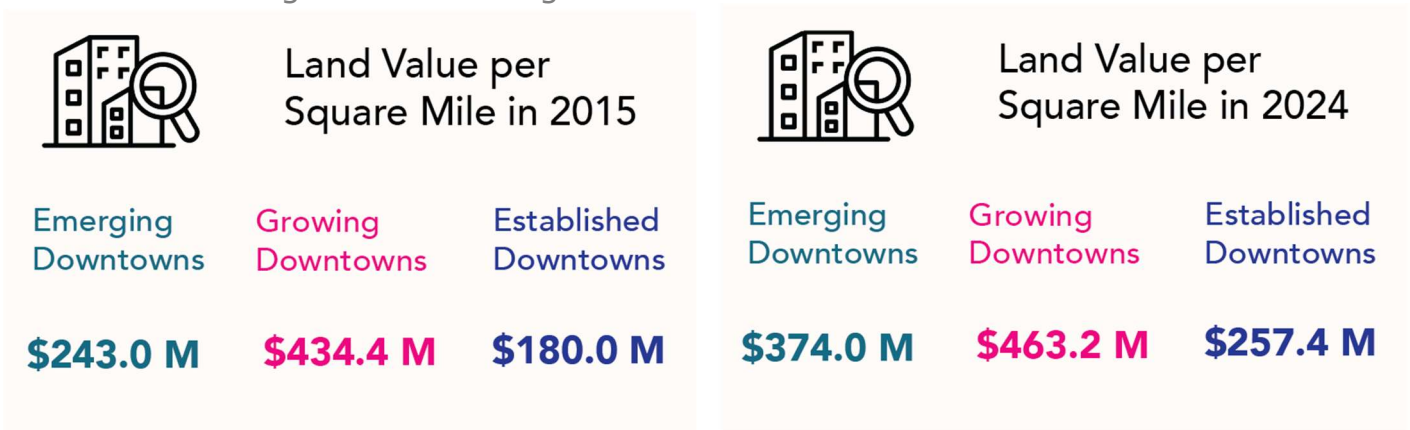
*De Pere, Eau Claire, Green Bay, Janesville, La Crosse, Historic King Drive, Port Washington, Racine, Sturgeon Bay, Watertown, Wausau, and West Allis*

## Economy

Downtowns in Wisconsin serve as the heart of local and regional commercial activity. As key assets and indicators of municipal well-being, Wisconsin downtowns have denser concentrations of employment, cultural goods, and real estate values. While some Wisconsin downtowns have seen minimal recent development, the historic preservation of these areas has retained their status as economic anchors, boosting the revenues of many villages, towns, and cities. Wisconsin downtowns also often serve as a government center, hosting public institutions in and adjacent to central business districts.

Recently, shifting trends in consumer and employment activity means the economies of Wisconsin downtowns are faced with a new set of challenges. Downtowns with a historically large compliment of office uses have seen decreases in worker presence, if not a decline in actual leased space. Conversely, downtowns with large residential populations now have a new daytime customer base with remote workers. A consistent pattern is the considerable share of citywide jobs still present downtown, with high concentrations of small businesses collectively employing 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.



## 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 Axel, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

## Economy

Across Wisconsin, these 41 downtowns represent a powerful story of transformation and local momentum. From towns just starting their downtown revitalization to those with well-established and sustained growth, the data shows how communities evolve through distinct stages of growth.

*Emerging* downtowns, averaging just 19 blocks, are in the early stages of development, or represent small communities. With an average of 508 downtown employees, 120 businesses, and 28 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 31 blocks, 1704 employees, and 322 businesses, these towns are rapidly expanding their economic base. Notably, they host 63 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 33 blocks, they support 1807 employees and a robust 900 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.



Image: downtown Green Bay

## People

Downtowns are inviting areas that draw people to socialize and shop in uniquely walkable spaces. Residents of downtown districts tend to be better educated and are more likely to be employed in professional services. In many cases, this trend represents a change in lifestyle preference, as many young professionals prefer downtown living.

Downtowns also tend to have more low-income and renter households than other parts of the city. Coupled with the higher concentration of early career adults, a better picture of downtown comes into focus. More affordable housing stock and access to an urban lifestyle means people downtown are younger and more well educated.

*Emerging, growing, and established* downtowns average roughly a quarter of their population as degree holders over the age of 25. 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 25. 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

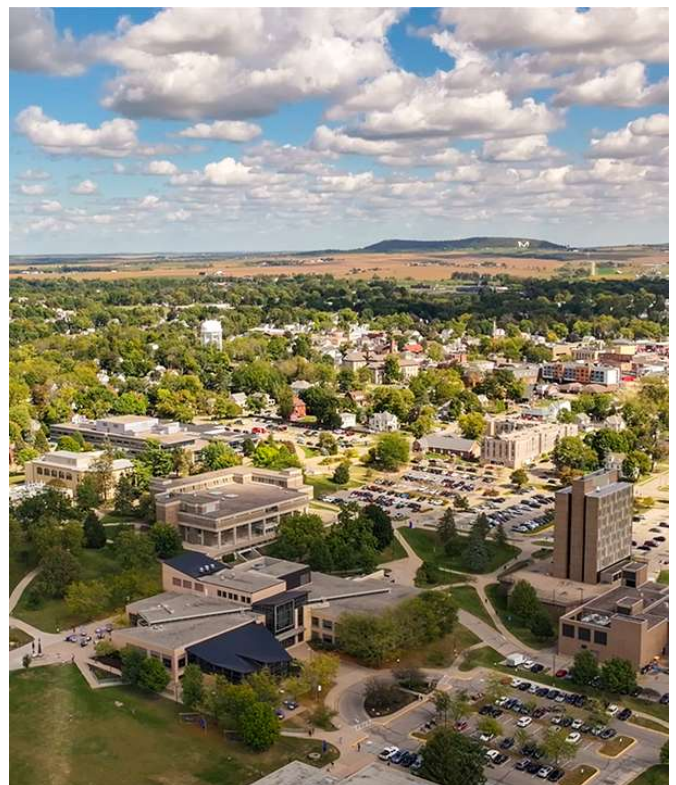
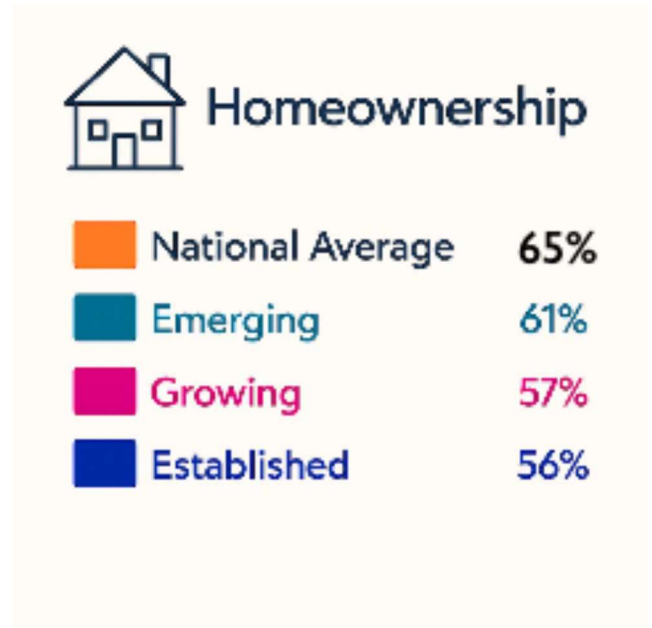


Image: downtown Platteville, University of Wisconsin-Platteville

## People

Downtown households are predominantly homeowners—in WEDC’s study districts, 58% of households own their home, compared to 65% nationally. There are exceptions to this rule, but few, in both downtown Platteville and Historic King Drive, the majority of 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.



Sources: American Community Survey, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

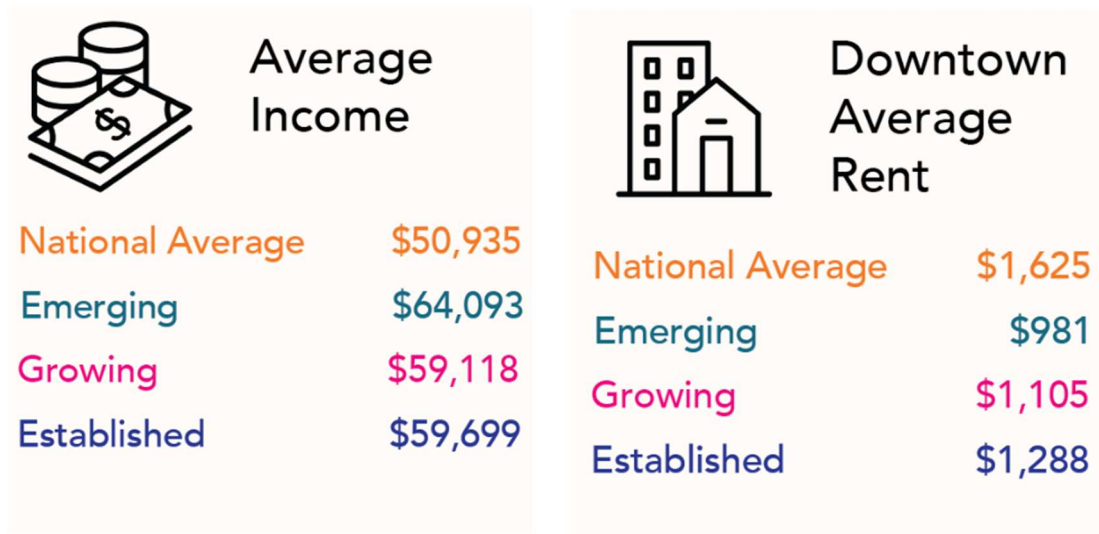


Image: downtown Milwaukee

## People

This infographic 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.

A low demand for rental properties within *emerging* communities while still catering to higher income career opportunities may explain their relative affordability compared to other downtowns. Meanwhile, *growing* and *established* downtowns have better known urban cores that command higher rents while retaining a relatively similar level of income.



Sources: American Community Survey, Data Axel, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

## Housing

Wisconsin downtowns, as with most housing markets, have seen a rise in both incomes and rents in recent years. As in many markets, rental prices are increasingly outpacing incomes, especially in new construction. All three downtown categories show this trend; but the mismatch is most acute in *growing* communities.

To tackle rising rents and stave off displacement, municipalities have become more concerned with housing affordability. Many Wisconsin cities have established programs to increase housing development, especially downtown. By increasing supply, rents overall may decline, and increased housing options for older populations can free up smaller homes for new households.

In the Madison and Milwaukee areas, a push to develop “missing middle” housing seeks to construct units with density between mid-rise apartments and detached single-family homes, creating additional denser options.

Currently, *emerging* downtowns average 299 residential units. *Growing* downtowns have around 460 units, and *established* downtowns boast 597 residential units. This displays the integral role housing plays in the development of vibrant downtown communities.



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 shrinks from 6 workers per resident to 4 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 for 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. 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: Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

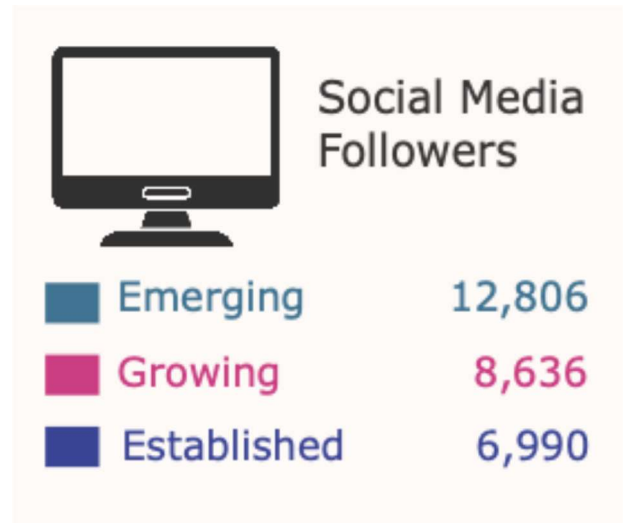


Images: Top, downtown Menomonie; Bottom, downtown Madison

## 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

Beyond just being economic powerhouses, downtowns are repositories of history, central to urban life and cultural hubs, bringing together different people and cultures, and housing not only work and recreation but also significant historical assets. These cultural, recreational and entertainment assets are not just central to the identity of the city and region—but serve as key downtown visitation magnets and anchors for downtown.

Those assets attract higher average downtown populations. Across *emerging*, *growing*, and *established* downtowns, population increases dramatically with the relative presence of downtown amenities.

Similarly, unemployment in Wisconsin 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



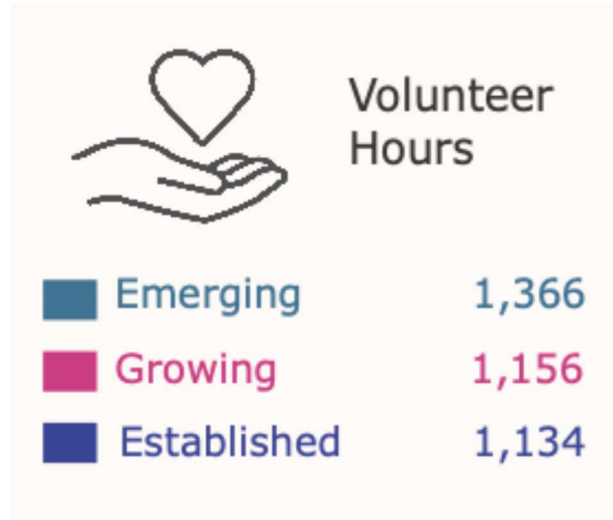
### Unemployment

National Average	4.00
Emerging	2.77
Growing	2.99
Established	2.81

Source: United States Census

## 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 without as many financial resources, allowing them to achieve more with less money.



Source: Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation




Image: downtown Eau Claire

## Resilience

Wisconsin downtowns are uniquely walkable and bikeable places. Unlike other parts of the city, downtown does not require the daily use of automotive transportation. Some *Established* Wisconsin downtowns like Historic King Drive, Milwaukee and On Broadway, Green Bay also have public bus systems, adding to local connectivity. Municipalities committed to community resilience recognize that a robust downtown neighborhood is essential to long-term sustainability increases. The result is a built environment that facilitates more social connectivity and better public health.

According to the IDA's report, residents of downtown areas produce a significantly lower carbon footprint than others in neighboring communities. Nationally, American's living downtown less than half of the CO2 emissions as other non-downtown households; per the IDA. These same citizens are four times more likely to walk to work.

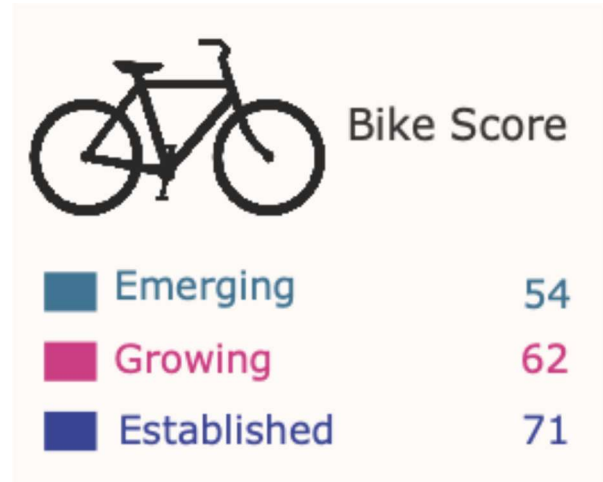
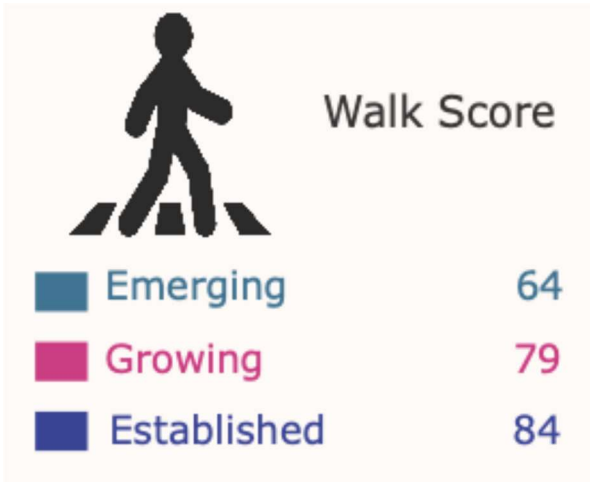
 **Downtown residents**  
are **4x more likely**  
to walk to work

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 caters 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.

## Resilience



### 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 Axel, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, Placer.ai

## Conclusion

City centers have always also been centers of economic prosperity, cultural richness, vibrant street life, communal identity and societal resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged traditional downtown land use models and accelerated *emerging* trends. As civic, business and community leaders continue to navigate the impact of changing work patterns post-pandemic, the continued success of these crucial neighborhoods will depend on a willingness to adapt and change the built environment to new realities. The future of our cities depends a great deal on the success of our downtowns – the median Wisconsin downtown has assessed land values of \$393.3 million per square mile. Greater emphasis on mixed-use real estate, continued residential growth and further emphasizing arts, culture, entertainment and accommodation assets will ensure prosperity and vibrancy in Wisconsin downtowns in the years to come.

Wisconsin downtowns should strive to grow and transition from *emerging*, to *growing*, to *established* communities. Downtowns that focus on areas where they lag behind their peer communities will see future growth. Key categories include business and residential density, district size, and connectivity. Large downtowns with density of housing and commercial space that are exceptionally walkable and bikeable are more likely to be categorized as *established* communities. Wisconsin downtowns can focus on attracting more businesses, establishing second floor housing, emphasize in-fill development, and maintaining pedestrian friendly streets.



Image: downtown Wausau

## Key Data Points

Status	Community	Downtown Square Mileage (mi <sup>2</sup> )	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
	Dartington	0.1	378	104	16	77	3,426,027	\$ 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	20	76	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
	Menomonee	0.08	629	142	18	210	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
Growing	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
	Beaver Dam	0.21	1,604	38	8	1,076	1,200,000	\$ 46,003,800	\$ 1,125	\$ 68,757	81	54
	Bebit	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	3,753	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
Established	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	2,988,258	\$ 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
	De Pere	0.15	1,267	259	40	434	340,979	\$ 70,291,100	\$ 1,500	\$ 80,550	85	71
	Eau Claire	0.49	10,202	650	136	1,258	5,100,000	\$ 362,874,900	\$ 975	\$ 69,475	87	88
Established	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	1,488	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

Source Notes: Although many districts track local data on residents and businesses, standardized information was used for this report in order to draw comparisons. As a result, there may be discrepancies between local district reports and this data. As one example, because of the way medical professionals are licensed, each individual often appears as an independent business, increasing the number of recorded businesses in districts with medical concentrations.

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