

Evers Campaign: Main Street bounceback powers record number of new small businesses in the northwoods

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MADISON, Wis. — A record number of new small businesses have opened in the Northwoods as Wisconsin's economy continues to grow under Governor Tony Evers' common sense leadership.

In Eagle River alone, 15 new small businesses have opened in the past two years — and 10 of those businesses have received grants from Gov. Evers' Main Street Bounceback program. Across Vilas County, "there's been new clothing stores, outdoor goods, restaurants, and even a newspaper setting up shop."

With a [record low unemployment rate](#), a [15% tax cut for middle-class families](#), and [thousands of small businesses opening](#) — Wisconsin's economy is strong and continuing to grow.

Gov. Evers is [doing what's right for small businesses](#) because when Main Street is thriving, it puts local people to work, keeps communities strong, and helps build the future we want.

Read more below about how more people than ever are opening small businesses in the Northwoods.

[WXPR: More people than ever are opening new businesses in the Northwoods](#)

Casey Anderson loves her job.

“It’s a way to help animals feel better. You know, you look good, feel good, do good. That’s in the animal kingdom too,” she said with a laugh.

Anderson has just about always held the title of dog groomer. She started washing dogs when she was 13 years old and has been grooming them for years.

But it wasn’t until this past September that she got to add a second job title: business owner.

“I officially opened on September first, and it has not slowed down since that day,” said Anderson.

Anderson rents a space in downtown Rhinelander and opened her own grooming business, Pawsitively Stylin’.

While there were a couple of things that motivated her to branch out on her own, her biggest motivator was her kids.

“I’m a single mom to two awesome, little humans,” she said.

With them now in middle school, Anderson says their schooling and extra curriculars are taking up more of her time.

Going into business for herself allowed Anderson to set her own hours.

“My kids schedule comes first. So here I am, running my own business and it’s been a beautiful, wonderful thing,” said Anderson.

That’s not to say it’s been easy.

Her opening day got slightly pushed back because of shipping delays on products she needed to open.

Learning the ins and outs of budgeting and scheduling has been an adventure.

“Finding out that you know, you might not be able to make your bills, so you might have to apply for a loan was one of the scariest things for me I think,” she said.

Even with the scary moments, it’s a move Anderson doesn’t regret making.

It's also a move she hasn't been alone in making.

Record number of new businesses

Earlier this month, the U.S. Census Bureau reported 5.4 million new business applications were filed in 2021. That surpasses the record of 4.4 million set in 2020.

It's a national trend reflected in the Northwoods says Vilas County Economic Development Corporation Executive Director Kathy Schmitz.

"I am truly encouraged by the truly unprecedented number of new businesses that have opened in Vilas County," she said.

Schmitz said in the last two years, 15 new businesses have opened in Eagle River alone.

Across the county there's been new clothing stores, outdoor goods, restaurants, and even a newspaper setting up shop.

"I think there's a real sense of renewed energy here in the county," said Schmitz.

While opening new a business may be a national trend, Schmitz says there's been a unique aspect found in those opening businesses in the Vilas County.

They're moving here to do it. Schmitz said it's a combination of improved broadband, marketing pushes, and people wanting live in a beautiful area.

"You know many of these business owners are people that have had a connection to the area. They grew up here. They have relatives here or a spouse or significant other from here. A second home. Or like me, they vacationed here growing up," said Schmitz. "According to the recent census Vilas County has a 7.5% population increase. Young people have moved into the area and that really raises really wonderful prospects for future growth."

This was the case for the Clark's who now run The Sawbuck in Land O'Lakes.

"I grew up spending my summers up here, my family's been on Duck Lake in Watersmeet for a century. My dad grew up up here, my grandpa grew up up here," said Bill Clark.

It's a similar story for his wife, Brittany.

"My parents had a place on the Three Lakes chain," she said.

Brittany and Bill moved up to the Land O'Lakes area from southern Wisconsin about three years ago, while still splitting their time down south.

Last March, they bought what used to be Forget Me Knot Floral and turned it into The Sawbuck.

"We closed the deal. We took the keys on March 1st and didn't even spend a day closed," said Bill.

They've kept the garden center and expanded the coffee bar to include ice cream, Vienna beef hot dogs, and now soups in the winter months.

"[We] Replaced all the antiques with seating, dining areas to make people feel welcome, make them want to hang out, spend an afternoon on the WiFi," said Bill.

The couple had been floating the idea of opening up their own business for a while.

"I mean as long as we've been together, every time we've come Up North we'd pass through little towns on Highway 45 and stuff. There'd be a little store front with an apartment upstairs, 'Oh that's a cool place. We could do X, Y, or Z with that,'" said Bill.

They decided to take the plunge when they heard through the grapevine Forget Me Knot Floral's owner was looking to sell.

Bill had years of experience in the restaurant and service industry.

Brittany had been working for Child Support Enforcement for the last 10 years.

"Never feel like you're stuck in job that you think you're trapped in. I thought I was going to be a lifer," said Brittany.

The Clark's have been overall happy with the change. They love that they get to live where they once were just vacationing.

Business was booming in the summer months.

Bill said the winter months have been a bit slower, which makes can make being a new business owner a little daunting at times.

“Seeing the sales tax bill we gotta pay every quarter and seeing some of those bills we’re getting from vendors it’s kind of like, ‘Oh my god. What did we get ourselves into here?’ But all in all, things are coming together and we’re getting a little better at it every day,” he said.

One thing that has helped immensely is a supportive community.

Community support among growing downtowns

The Clark’s say the other local businesses and community members have been extremely supportive, like Andy who showed up with well pump.

“He heard our well pump was broken ten minutes ago and just showed up with a brand new well pump for us. I think that’s serves the purpose. How has the community response been? Like that,” said Bill.

Back in Rhinelander, Anderson says the same thing.

“The love I received when I opened this was unbelievable,” she said.

The new business owners also feel apart of something greater than themselves as they watch once empty storefronts fill in around them.

Schmitz contributes at least part of that to the Main Street Bounceback Program from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation. She said 10 businesses in Eagle River have gotten the grants.

“Some people have moved their business around the county. Others have really taken this as an opportunity to revitalize and expand their current business,” she said.

The program provides \$10,000 grants to new or existing businesses that move into vacant downtown properties.

Anderson received one for Pawsitively Stylin’. The grant helped her buy new equipment and will help with some building improvements.

“It was great to be able to open up a business and have those opportunities be there for you, because in the end I think overall in our community, they do want to see us small businesses succeed so that we can grow our town,” said Anderson.

Anderson says it’s exciting and feels lucky to be part of a growing downtown Rhinelander.

The Clark’s share that sentiment.

“I think people still remember the Land O’Lakes, the post-recession Land O’Lakes, where every business was closed or empty shelves,” said Bill. “The town is in the middle of a comeback, and we’re excited to ride that wave.”