

# Gov. Evers, WEDC: Announce Main Street Bounceback grants have helped more than 3,400 small businesses open storefronts in all 72 counties

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MERCER — Gov. Tony Evers, together with Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes, announced, with new recipients in Iron County awarded today, the Main Street Bounceback grant program has now helped fill vacant storefronts in all 72 counties and has helped more than 3,400 small businesses and nonprofit organizations across the state. In April 2021, Gov. Evers [announced](#) the state would dedicate \$50 million toward helping small business owners open physical locations and communities fill vacant storefronts. An analysis from November 2021 showed that as a share of federal pandemic aid the state has received and directed by Gov. Evers, Wisconsin ranked second in the country for aid directed to economic development, and first in the country in aid allocated to businesses

“I’m proud we’ve been a national leader in our work to invest in small businesses and ensure our main streets and our communities rebound and recover,” said Gov. Evers. “Small businesses are an essential part of our state and local economies. This program is about making sure we’re investing in our long-term economic success by helping entrepreneurs and new business owners achieve their business dreams while revitalizing main streets in every corner of our state, creating jobs, gathering places, and new opportunities for communities.”

Gov. Evers, Secretary and CEO Hughes, and area business owners celebrated the

success of the Main Street Bounceback grants during a visit Thursday to Aurora Up North which is a flooring, décor, and accessories store in Mercer. The store is one of two businesses that received a \$10,000 Main Street Bounceback grant in Iron County, making Iron County the 72nd county to have businesses that applied and were awarded grants from this program. With this addition, now every county in Wisconsin has benefitted from Main Street Bounceback grants.

“The businesses and organizations that have received these grants are all different—everything from restaurants and barbershops to mental health providers and chambers of commerce,” said Secretary and CEO Hughes. “The one thing they all have in common is that they are investing in making their communities a better place.”

Kimberly Norkunas, owner of Aurora Up North and a Marine veteran, and her husband, Chip, have been transforming an old Mercer building that, according to local legend, was once a bar frequented by Al Capone and other gangsters. Most recently a pizza place and then an antique store, the couple is giving the building a new life by using half of the space to sell flooring, which Chip installs. The other half of the store is being transformed into Gunny SunShine’s PX, where Kimberly plans to sell accessories and home furnishings. Having earned the rank of Gunnery Sergeant (E-7) during her 21-year career in the Marines, Kimberly acquired the nickname Gunny SunShine because of her tendency to always be smiling. A native Californian, Kimberly chose Wisconsin when she decided to start her own business.

“We like the traditions and we love the people,” Kimberly Norkunas said. “It’s a very open arms group of people. It’s like being in front of a roaring fire because everyone’s so warm. Other local businesses here have been giving us tips. I want to accentuate and add on to what they’re doing—not take stuff away.”

In addition to Aurora Up North, the North Pole Bar in Hurley is the second business in Iron County that received a Main Street Bounceback grant. Eva and Bill Bruce decided to buy the bar in order to show others the beauty of Wisconsin’s Northwoods. The bar is located on a snowmobile and ATV trail, and the owners hope to build a campground resort on the property surrounding the North Pole Bar. They hope to make it a place where people can enjoy nature and time with friends and family.

“Fishing, hunting, snowmobiling, ATVing—it’s really what we want to tell people Wisconsin is all about,” said Bill Bruce.

At least one more Iron County business has applied for a Main Street Bounceback grant and Kelly Klein, coordinator for the Iron County Development Zone, said he is working with other local businesses that are planning to apply.

“Helping entrepreneurs get started with new businesses has been a focus of our economic development efforts in Iron County,” said Klein. “The Main Street Bounceback grants have been very helpful for Aurora Up North and the North Pole to get going with start-up costs.”

Funds for the Main Street Bounceback Grant Program are provided by the federal American Rescue Plan Act and have made a difference to business districts around the state from Washburn in the north to Prairie du Chien in the south. Washburn, a city of about 2,000 people on Lake Superior’s Chequamegon Bay, has received 12 Main Street Bounceback grants so far.

“We had so many open opportunities, vacant locations,” said Melissa Martinez, director of the Washburn Area Chamber of Commerce. “It helped us fill in a lot of gaps that have been sitting there empty for years and it’s really allowed some existing businesses to expand, opening up some smaller spaces for more Main Street Bounceback grants.”

Crawford County, situated along the Mississippi River in Southern Wisconsin, has received 30 Main Street Bounceback grants so far, with 23 of those businesses located in Prairie du Chien.

“The economic impact of those dollars is gigantic for our small, rural county,” said Carol Roth, the executive director of Driftless Development Inc. which is the economic development organization for Crawford County. “To large companies, \$10,000 may not be as significant, however to these small businesses it’s so important. It also lets these business owners know that someone is supporting them.”

WEDC is working with nine regional economic development organizations to quickly disburse grant funding to eligible businesses and nonprofit organizations. More information about the Main Street Bounceback Grant Program and how to apply is available on the WEDC website [here](#). The program is scheduled to run through June 30, 2022.