

WEDC: City of Park Falls receives \$250,000 state grant to support redevelopment of downtown property

Posted on Friday, Jan 21, 2022

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PARK FALLS, WI. JAN. 20, 2022 – A \$250,000 state grant to help the city of Park Falls create a park and gateway to its downtown has spurred redevelopment leading to a new bank building, an expanded community clinic and new investments downtown, city leaders say.

“The state’s investment is meant to serve as a spark to inspire communities and businesses to revitalize their downtown and ensure residents have access to the services and amenities that make Wisconsin a great place to live,” said Missy Hughes, secretary and CEO of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC). “What has happened in Park Falls is a fantastic example of how economic development works.”

The Community Development Investment Grant from WEDC allowed the city to pay for infrastructure and street improvements to redevelop a 2.5 acre site into a larger city park and a site for a new Forward Bank building. The development, at the intersection of Wisconsin highways 13 and 182, serves as a gateway to Park Falls’ downtown, Mayor Michael Bablick said.

“This project has done everything we hoped for in terms of acting as a catalyst,” Bablick said, noting that three businesses have undergone extensive renovations and two other downtown buildings have been purchased. “Our downtown has seen very little renovation or new buildings in the past 50 years. This project reset that clock and there continues to be further interest in the downtown, with more exciting

additions and renovations likely on the way.”

Hughes, WEDC Deputy Secretary Sam Ridders, Bablick and other community members gathered to celebrate the opening of Forward Bank’s new building Thursday in Park Falls.

“The WEDC grant had a large cascading impact in the Park Falls community,” said Bill Sennholz, CEO of Forward Bank. “It started with the opportunity to improve a downtown district, created a reason for Forward Bank to build a beautiful new facility, and rippled on to NorthLakes Clinic finding a home in the building that the bank vacated. The effects of one grant will continue to ripple out into the community for years to come as improvements continue to be made.”

In November, NorthLakes Community Clinic began seeing patients at their new downtown Park Falls location – the former Forward Bank.

The city helped connect the bank and clinic after learning that NorthLakes needed more space to offer needed mental health and expanded chiropractic services. Forward Bank was able to sell their old building and NorthLakes was able to move into a highly-visible location in downtown Park Falls.

“We’re strongly committed to continuing to grow our services to meet the needs of the Park Falls area and this move would not have been possible without the community’s support,” said Reba Rice, CEO of NorthLakes. “We’re hopeful that our move plays a small role in helping revitalize downtown Park Falls.”

Business owners and community members can see the activity downtown and want to be a part of it, said Katie Freiburger, who with her husband, Paul, runs Night and Day Construction. They’ve also purchased and renovated two downtown buildings, the Park Theatre and a retail building with room for three businesses directly across from the new park.

“We were excited about what was happening downtown,” Freiburger, a Park Falls native, said of the family’s purchase of the movie theater. “We wanted to be a part of that. We wanted to give our downtown something everyone could be proud of.”

The theater was purchased in February 2020 and the Freiburgers spent much of the pandemic shutdown doing extensive remodeling – though the couple preserved the original mural in the lobby, the bright 1950s style color scheme and added a display

of the theater's cinematic history in the renovated lobby. Their work was showcased this spring when the Park Falls High School held their prom there.

The couple continues to renovate their other downtown building, which currently has a women's clothing store. A new tenant is opening up business there this month and a third space is available, Freiburger said.

As for the future, the one-screen Park Theatre also features a large stage that the Freiburgers repaired. They're hoping to host live events there such as concerts, comedians and more, once it's safe to do so.

They may have some competition from the nearby park the city is working on, Bablick said. Residents and the city are still working on plans for the city's newest park but Bablick said one of the top ideas is to include a large stage and gathering area as well as plenty of space for children's activities.

"We're hoping this will be one of the premier outdoor event spaces in Northern Wisconsin," Bablick said.

The city's efforts downtown are drawing attention.

"A healthy community is attractive to both businesses and people looking to move to the area for work and quality of life," said state Rep. Beth Meyers. "The redevelopment of this section of downtown is an excellent example of a working partnership that ensures northern Wisconsin continues to grow and thrive."

"It's great to see continued investment in northern Wisconsin," said state Sen. Janet Bewley. "I want to thank WEDC and the leaders in Park Falls for their efforts to expand businesses, offer more space for the community to grow, and develop infrastructure throughout downtown. This partnership will have positive effects on all of Price County for generations to come."

WEDC's Community Development Investment Grant Program supports community development and redevelopment efforts, primarily in downtown areas. The matching grants are awarded based on the ability of applicants to demonstrate the economic impact of the proposed project, including public and private partnership development, financial need, and use of sustainable downtown development practices.