



# Helping communities create meaningful places

UW-Extension provides Wisconsin's small towns with a viable alternative to traditional planning that inspires positive change.

What gives a community its unique identity, sense of place and vitality? A bustling downtown filled with shops, housing and a mix of activities? Clear visual distinction between the country and the city? Ease of movement from one part of the community to another, with inviting paths for walking or biking? What process can community members use to discover and pursue a shared vision of the future?

For years, experts have studied what goes into good community design. University of Wisconsin-Extension community development educators, who work directly with local officials and citizens, recognized the need for a tested, user-friendly way for communities to identify strategies designed to enhance community life.

## What UW-Extension is doing

To address communities' need to develop a shared vision of the future, UW-Extension formed the **Community Vitality and Placemaking Team**. The team consists of statewide specialists and community-based educators who develop and conduct placemaking programs in Wisconsin's small towns. The team travels around the state giving presentations, training local residents in public participation and placemaking strategies and techniques, and directly assisting with community efforts.

The Design Wisconsin Team, a subgroup of the Community Vitality and Placemaking Team, uses a community design **charrette** process first developed in Minnesota and adapted based on University of Wisconsin research and resources. Teams of 20 volunteer planning and design professionals are embedded in a community over the course of a long weekend to facilitate an intense series of public participation activities. The outcomes of the activities are then expressed with 15-20 hand-drawn renderings of a desired future state, along with a practical plan to pursue the goal.

## Outcomes

- In 2014, the community of Grantsburg, Wisconsin piloted the first Design Wisconsin Team visit. Within six months, the community had developed action teams around specific outcomes from the visit. Today, Grantsburg has developed new trails complete with informational kiosks, benches and way-finding elements; investigated possible public/private partnerships to redevelop areas of the downtown; and started cleaning up sensitive natural areas in and around the downtown.
- In 2015, the Design Wisconsin program visited the small town of Baileys Harbor, Wisconsin. As with Grantsburg, the community quickly organized itself around the outcomes of the visit. A year

## Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development Impact Report

---

later, Baileys Harbor had developed a recycling center; transformed an existing community building into a community center offering programs for all ages; and identified new park and water access locations. It is currently in the process of reinvesting in its downtown.

- In 2016, Iron County, Wisconsin asked the University of Wisconsin-Extension to facilitate a community design charrette for the purpose of developing trailheads for a new regional, multi-modal trail. Design Wisconsin team members worked with local teens to conduct an intense program that provided the community with a clear vision of the future.
- In 2016, the Community Vitality and Placemaking team produced a new publication titled *Principles and Practice of Community Placemaking*. The new publication covers 19 basic principles of community placemaking and includes numerous examples of successful efforts in Wisconsin and around the country.
- In April 2017, the Community Vitality and Placemaking Team was recognized with a Top Rural Development initiative award from Wisconsin Rural Partners, Inc. The UW-Extension team was honored for its work helping communities discover and pursue a shared vision of the future.

...

UW-Extension's Community Design Team model continues to provide Wisconsin's small towns with a viable alternative to traditional planning that inspires positive changes.



### For more information, contact:

#### Todd W. Johnson

Land Use & Community  
specialist  
UW-Extension/UW-River Falls  
715-425-3941  
[todd.johnson@uwrf.edu](mailto:todd.johnson@uwrf.edu)

