

INSIGHT

PERSONALITIES

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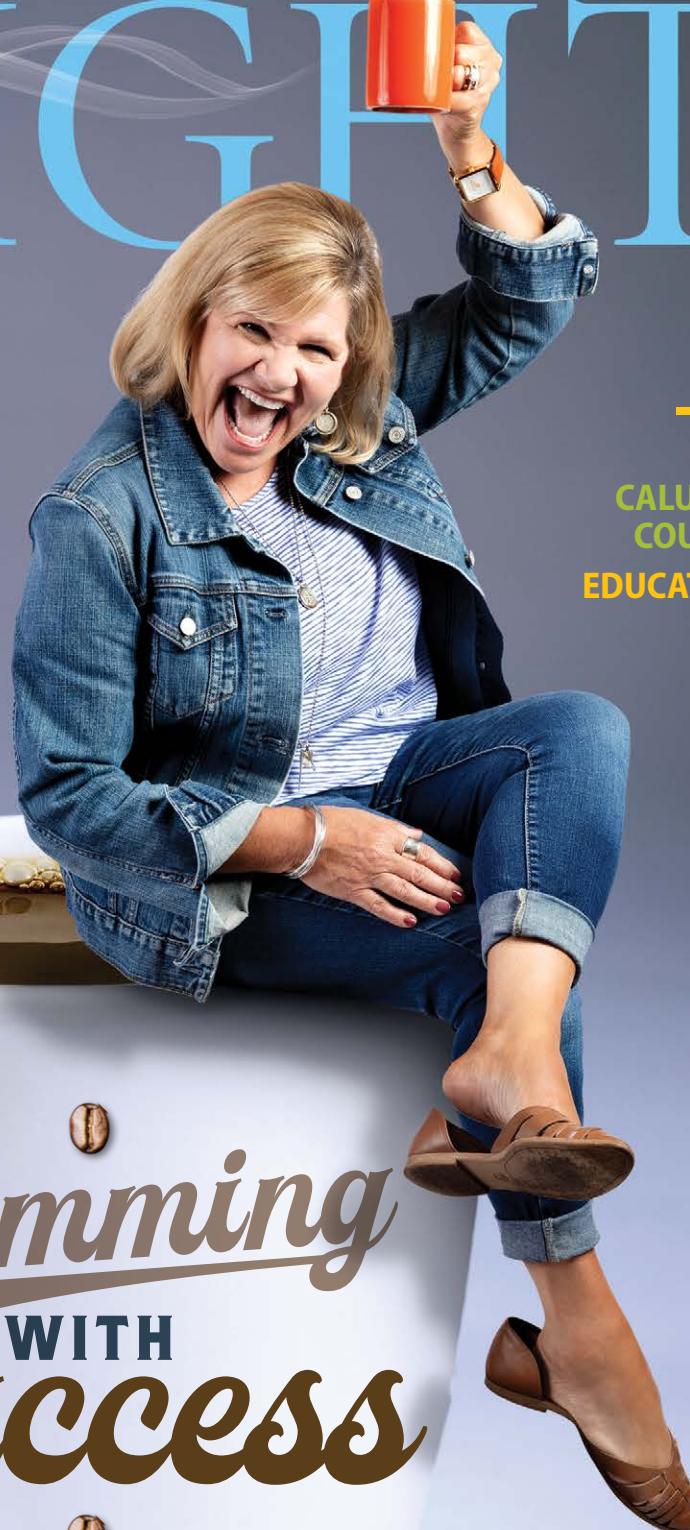
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NEW NORTH

Ag tourism plays growing economic role



CALUMET
COUNTY
EDUCATION



QUALITY SETS
DOOR COUNTY COFFEE APART

Vicki Wilson, owner of Door County Coffee, says high-quality ingredients and an intense focus on customer service have set the roaster and coffee retailer apart from its competitors.

A day on the farm

Ag tourism adds dollars to local economies



What happens when you combine two of Wisconsin's strongest industries? When it comes to agriculture and tourism, there's a sweet spot — known as ag tourism — that provides farmers with additional income, injects money into the local economy and educates people about agriculture.

Ag tourism is what it sounds like: tourism focused on agriculture. It can be on a small scale, such as Mulberry Lane Farm near Hilbert where visitors can chase a chicken, milk a cow or pet a goat, or a large scale such as the new 29,000-square-foot Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center outside of Manitowoc where visitors can learn about where their food comes from in interactive, hands-on exhibits and visit a dairy farm.

"Ag tourism brings together agriculture, an \$88 billion industry in Wisconsin, and tourism, which adds \$20 billion to the state's economy," says Sheila Everhart, president of the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association, which has hundreds of members across the state. "People may not realize when they got lost in a corn maze, picked their own strawberries or visited a dairy farm that they've experienced ag tourism."

When Mulberry Lane Farm opened in October 2005, owner Bonnie Keyes says 500 families visited that first month. Last year, 15,000 people visited the farm between mid-September and the end of October.

"We have a lot of families who come,

whether it's millennials who bring their kids and want them to experience nature or grandparents who grew up on a farm or around a farm and want to share that experience with their grandchildren," Keyes says. "We provide so many hands-on experiences."

It's not just October that's busy, as visitors come throughout the spring and summer, whether they are locals or visitors who want to experience a farm, Keyes says. During EAA AirVenture in July, visitors flocked to the farm because "they're in Wisconsin and they want to milk a cow," she says.

That interest in learning about farms and where food comes from drove the creation of the \$13 million Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center, which is located just off Interstate 43 in Manitowoc. Executive Director Lauren Rose Hofland says the center's aim is to help educate the 98 percent of people who do not work on farms or understand where their food comes from.

Hofland says the goal is to attract 100,000 people per year and have those visitors spend money at nearby businesses, whether it's gas stations, retail shops or restaurants.

"The center also has a convention center where we can serve up to 200 people for a dinner," she says. "That's another option for organizations or people looking to hold events, and that money comes into the local economy."

Mulberry Lane Farm in rural Calumet County has seen a steady increase in visitors as well as the number of weddings held onsite. Owner Bonnie Keyes says special events, such as weddings, are a boost to the local economy since visitors spend money at local hotels, gas stations and restaurants, and the newlyweds spend money on local photographers, florists and other wedding vendors.

The center not only wants to attract visitors from the New North, but across Wisconsin and beyond, Hofland says.

"There's nothing out there like the Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center. The center is ideal for everyone to visit since so many of us know so little about where our food comes from," she says.

Farms also are a popular location for weddings, Keyes says.

"Our weddings have an average of 200 guests, and that brings in much-needed ag tourism dollars to rural Calumet County and the Fox Valley hotels, bars, food caterers, beverage caterers, florists, hair salons, bridal attire stores, etc.," she says. "Agritourism and barn weddings have a wonderful trickle-down effect in many ways most people don't consider."

Steve Nagy, owner of Homestead Meadows in Greenville, agrees couples like the idea of having a farm backdrop for their weddings.

"We easily host 60 weddings a year — people want to be back in a natural setting," he says, adding that students also visit his farm to learn more about wetlands and ecology.

Everhart of the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association and owner of Everhart Family Farms in Rock County says the increased interest in visiting farms and other ag attractions is simple: "People want an experience in agriculture and we're happy to provide that." 

On the web:

Read more about the new Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center and how the facility took eight years to come together.

insightonbusiness.com



Growth factor

Public, private sectors collaborate in Calumet County

Calumet County has historically been one of the fastest-growing counties in Wisconsin based on population alone. The blended focus on manufacturing, tourism and agriculture drives the county's economy, but not without challenges.

Wisconsin unemployment numbers have dipped to record lows, but like many states, it faces significant challenges when it comes to workforce development and recruitment. According to a recent Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development report, many businesses say the lack of qualified workers has hindered expansion and, in some cases, even curtailed their ability to meet current product orders.

Calumet County is no different, and in fact, also faces the challenge of having one of the state's highest negative commuter workforce rates.

"More residents of Calumet County leave for work every day than almost any other county in Wisconsin," says Mary Kohrell, community economic development director for Calumet County. "Our challenge is helping our local employers, through programs and workforce development opportunities, find employees within our county that can fulfill the needs of their businesses, and also to find and entice the employees that commute here for work every day to put down roots and live here as well."

The county's goals align well with the efforts already taking place between local communities and employers throughout Calumet County, Kohrell says.

"In many areas, our employers are driving these efforts. They want the county to be a place where people can work as well as live," she adds.

That's definitely the case in Brillion where Bob Endries, founder of Endries International Inc., and Dan Ariens, president and CEO of Ariens Co., have been instrumental in the city's downtown revitalization and development projects, Kohrell says.

In June, contractors broke ground on

a 6,300 square-foot facility known as the Brillion City Center. The project, which is part of the city's Main Street Square Initiative, is the first of several downtown redevelopment projects that will provide space for a new city hall, greenspace and enhancements to the Brillion Community Center.

"The city has been in need of a new city hall for a long time," says TJ Lamers, program manager for Integrated Public Resources/McMAHON Group, which will own the property. "We have studies going back at least a decade, but we really needed the public/private partnership to make this happen."

Endries and Ariens worked closely with the Brillion Redevelopment Authority to purchase the property so it could be redeveloped, Lamers says.

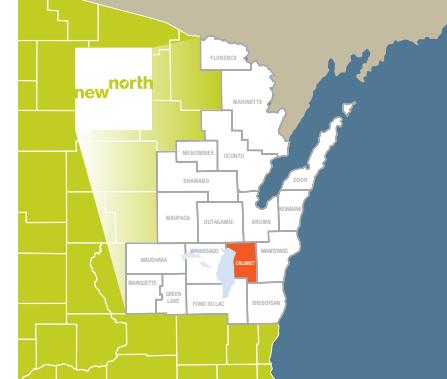
Called the Mainstreet Square Initiative, the redevelopment project has two phases underway: the construction of the Brillion City Center, which will serve as the city hall and is scheduled for completion by December; and the demolition of the former grocery store on the property to make way for a new, 40-unit workforce housing complex to be completed next year by Northpointe Development.

The city received a \$250,000 Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. grant to support the project, a huge step in transforming that area into a vibrant city center, says Beth Wenzel, chair of the Brillion Redevelopment Authority.

"This project is key for economic development in the community," she says. "We're trying to make Brillion a place where people want to stay and work, and ultimately pay taxes."

Once completed, the apartment project is expected to add more than \$7 million to the city's tax base and generate about \$154,000 in annual property taxes.

Ariens Co. also worked closely with the Brillion Redevelopment Authority to purchase the former Brillion Iron Works property located at 200 Park Ave. Wenzel



Two new projects will reshape Brillion's downtown: Brillion City Center, which will include a new city hall and enhancements to the community center, and a new 40-unit workforce housing complex.

says the stakeholders have been working closely with the proper state departments and are close to completing that deal as well.

While no definitive plans have been made for the property, Ariens was concerned with the facility becoming a potential blight on the community. Ariens is leasing part of the building from current owners, and there's a tentative plan from Green Bay-based Performa to do some mixed-use residential, light industrial and commercial developments, Wenzel says.

Similar efforts are underway in the Village of Hilbert, Kohrell says. Sargento Foods, which has undergone four expansions in the last decade, is one driving force behind economic development there.

The village purchased 50 acres of land near Sargento's recent expansion project that eventually will be turned into residential property, Kohrell says.

In Sherwood, the downtown redevelopment also has been strategic and methodical.

"Over the last five years, the village has made concerted efforts to acquire property with the intent of revitalizing its downtown area," Kohrell says.

Changes at High Cliff Banquet & Event Center and High Cliff Golf Course and partnerships with local businesses to produce a new wedding venue and catering business have sparked development in the community, Kohrell adds. **I**