



**Wisconsin Rural Partners, Inc.**

P.O. Box 27, Hollandale, WI 53544

608.967.2322 (ph/fax)

[ricky@wirural.org](mailto:ricky@wirural.org) - [www.wirural.org](http://www.wirural.org)

*Rick Rolfsmeyer, Executive Director*

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Contact: Ricky Rolfsmeyer, 608-967-2322; [ricky@wirural.org](mailto:ricky@wirural.org)

**Projects based in Neshkoro, Mineral Point and statewide through UW-Extension take Top Rural Development Initiative honors**

MOSINEE - Wisconsin Rural Partners, Inc. awarded the Top Rural Development Initiatives for 2011 at a ceremony at the Stoney Creek Inn and Conference Center in Mosinee, Wisconsin on Friday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011. The awards were presented by Wisconsin Rural Partners president Dennis Deery at the luncheon of the 2011 Wisconsin Rural Summit.

The three efforts receiving *Top Initiative* awards are:

- **Building Community Capacity through Broadband**, statewide through offices in Madison. The University of Wisconsin-Extension led the effort to secure the two largest grants in UWEX history: federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program grants and matching partner funds totaling approximately \$45.9 million. These grants will benefit communities by laying over 600 miles of fiber optic cabling connecting 182 anchor institutions (libraries, schools, hospitals, police, fire, government and healthcare) in Douglas, Chippewa, Dunn, Eau Claire, Marathon and Grant counties. Education and outreach efforts are occurring in these counties and also through the College of Menominee Nation to close the digital divide and bring citizens and businesses online and into the communities' economic mainstream.
- **Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen**, Mineral Point. The Innovation Kitchen is the only community-based food processing center in the United States with a full time, professionally licensed staff. Using this model, farmers, chefs, culinary professionals, and food entrepreneurs can start and grow their own businesses and private-label food brands.
- **Neshkoro Enhancement Committee**, Neshkoro. The spirit and hard work found in a Marquette County village of 434 has resulted in myriad successful projects, including the creation of two parks, a home and garden tour, a summer concert series, a community chorus (with over 50 members!), the Scarecrow Festival and many other initiatives. As the nomination said, "If we can do it, other communities can too."

Complete descriptions of the 2011 Top Rural Development Initiatives and local contacts are attached.

Wisconsin Rural Partners is a statewide non-profit organization that develops leadership, networks and voice for rural Wisconsin. WRP is the federally-recognized State Rural Development Council for Wisconsin.

This is the twelfth year that Wisconsin Rural Partners has recognized Wisconsin's Top Rural Development Initiatives. The program is designed to identify, highlight, and share innovative models, practices and programs that have a positive impact on rural Wisconsin communities. Wisconsin Rural Partners created the program to provide a mechanism for rural communities to learn from each other.

# Wisconsin's Top Rural Development Initiatives for 2011

## Project Briefs

### Building Community Capacity through Broadband

The University of Wisconsin-Extension led the effort to secure the two largest grants in UWEX history: federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program grants and matching partner funds totaling approximately \$45.9 million. These grants will benefit communities by laying over 600 miles of fiber optic cabling connecting 182 anchor institutions (libraries, schools, hospitals, police, fire, government and healthcare) in Douglas, Chippewa, Dunn, Eau Claire, Marathon and Grant counties.

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Broadband is the essential infrastructure of the 21st century—what electricity and water were to communities in the previous century. Just as UW-Extension was a leader in helping bring electricity to rural Wisconsin communities in the 1900s, today we are leading the initiative to bring community-owned, high speed broadband to Wisconsin communities through the “Building Community Capacity through Broadband” project.

Community-owned networks will connect key anchor institutions (schools, libraries, hospitals, police, fire and government) that sustain a community and help drive economic development.

UW Extension is working with WiscNet and private business Packerland Broadband to build the infrastructure that will connect these

communities. Community educators in all five communities are working to help community businesses and residents close the digital divide with free access to computers, training and education. From online webinars to internet coffee shop cafes, in libraries and Veterans' Centers, senior centers and shopping malls, our outreach coordinators are helping communities build their future with broadband.

The BCCB initiative is one that absolutely would not have happened without strong partnership and collaborative work from a network of strong statewide partners. By playing off the strength of multiple partners at the state, regional and local levels, we are laying a strong foundation to help build community capacity in our demonstration communities as well as examples of collaboration that other communities can draw from and replicate.

Statewide partners include: Packerland Broadband/CCI Systems, Inc.; University of Wisconsin Extension/Colleges; University of Wisconsin System; WiscNet; Wisconsin Department of Transportation; Wisconsin Educational Communications Board.

Demonstration Community Partners are: Douglas County; Dunn, Eau Claire and Chippewa counties; Menominee (and Menominee Nation); Marathon County and Grant County. Find a full list of partnering organizations within each of these communities here: <http://broadband.uwex.edu/partners/>

As an outgrowth of its century-long commitment to collaboration at the local level, University of Wisconsin-Extension (UWEX) has identified five demonstration communities

where BCCB sustainable broadband adoption activities will be conducted. Each will provide opportunities that target and benefit health care delivery, children (through K-12 school districts to maximize impact), other forms of education (library systems, universities, community colleges, a tribal college, technical colleges), and organizations working with vulnerable, low-income populations.

Each location has organized a Community Area Network (CAN) to coordinate the work of participating entities, share resources and streamline costs while expanding services. UWEX is helping facilitate the transformation of each CAN into a highly functioning learning community.

Our goal is to create materials for these communities that can then be shared with Wisconsin communities statewide to help build community connectivity to high speed, affordable internet, connect underserved populations with resources and training and to build community capacity through broadband. Materials we have developed / are developing include:

- **Community Area Network (CAN) 101:**

How-to guide for communities.

- **Video case studies** help make the case for community-based high speed, affordable broadband for economic/community development, health care, education, business and job creation and development, streamlining government costs while increasing service and community engagement.

(<http://youtube.com/wibroadband1>)

Contact:

Jennifer Smith

UW-Extension Office of Broadband Sustainability

660 W. Washington Ave., Suite 309  
Madison, WI 53703

Toll free: 855-306-8050

[j.smith@uwex.edu](mailto:j.smith@uwex.edu)

<http://broadband.uwex.edu>

## The Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen

The Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen was organized and launched by the Hodan Center in Mineral Point, WI, a non-profit organization supporting people with disabilities. The Innovation Kitchen opened for business on July 12, 2010.

The Innovation Kitchen is the only community-based food processing center in the United States with a full time, professionally licensed staff. Using this model, farmers, chefs, culinary professionals, and food entrepreneurs can start and grow their own businesses and private-label food brands.

Local farms can have their produce and recipes turned into beautiful private labeled products that can be sold year-round. Food entrepreneurs can create exciting new food products while supporting community and economic development goals.

Having a professional staff available means farmers and food entrepreneurs don't have to go through the time and expense of training, certification, insurance, etc. The Innovation Kitchen model helps them work smarter.

The Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen has been recognized by federal, state, regional and local governments, non-profits, businesses, development organizations and the media for its unique and valuable contributions to economic and community development in rural America.

The Innovation Kitchen has helped create and grow jobs for more than 30 people with disabilities. The kitchen directly and indirectly supports over 90 jobs in our rural communities and has helped to launch more than 30 new businesses statewide.

The Innovation Kitchen has processed and helped market over 150,000 pounds of produce grown in rural Wisconsin. This accomplishment helps bring new money to

rural areas and helps this money re-circulate through our communities and the region.

One of the Innovation Kitchen business startups was recently awarded the Wisconsin 2011 Minority Business Enterprise 'Rising Star' Award for the wonderful food products they produce through the Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen.

The Innovation Kitchen has been featured on network TV, Public TV, Public Radio, in newspapers and magazines across the state and nationally. They have been asked to speak about our initiative to community and economic development groups statewide and nationally.

Recently, their work at the Innovation Kitchen supporting rural development was featured in a visit to Iowa County by the Chairman and CEO of the United States Farm Credit Administration, Lee Strom.

The Innovation Kitchen has become a powerful new model creating exciting agricultural and food-based economic development initiatives for rural communities nationwide. Regional, state, and national media have published highly positive information about our accomplishments.

The Innovation Kitchen is the result of partnerships among federal, state and regional public agencies, non-profits, state, regional, county and local economic development organizations, Community Action Programs (CAP), local businesses and wide participation by community members.

The Southwest Wisconsin CAP Agency helped the non-profit Hodan Center organize a grant application for the initial funds, which were provided by the state through a Community Development Block Grant. Additional resources were provided by the federal USDA Rural Development office for Wisconsin. Community members donated generously and helped in the planning for the new kitchen

facility. The Iowa County Area Economic Development Corp. provided extensive business development services for the Innovation Kitchen and for new and existing businesses wishing to utilize its services. Local farms and businesses have partnered with the kitchen to grow their enterprises and create new jobs in our community.

The Innovation Kitchen initiative will create jobs and economic development opportunities in Southwest Wisconsin and across the state, region and nation for decades.

These jobs will not only support people with disabilities but also create pathways for good local foods to be grown, processed and consumed within their growing regions.

This initiative will provide a new and robust business development platform for farms and rural communities nationwide. The Innovation Kitchen's work to develop local and regional processing will create new opportunities for rural areas to tie into the commerce of regional population centers in valuable, sustainable ways for all involved.

The Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen is a valuable laboratory for developing sustainable regional food processing models across the country. Innovation Kitchen people look forward to sharing this initiative with rural communities nationwide.

Their goal is to create thousands of good local jobs in rural communities nationwide through a collaborative national network of independent, community based food facilities that can be marketed jointly.

Contact:  
Rick Terrien  
851 Dodge Street  
Mineral Point, WI 53565  
608-341-6797  
[rick.terrien@gmail.com](mailto:rick.terrien@gmail.com)  
[www.wi.innovationkitchen.org](http://www.wi.innovationkitchen.org)

## Neshkoro Enhancement Committee

Neshkoro, with 434 residents, is one of the poorest villages in Marquette County. Like the children's story *The Little Engine That Could*, this is the story of Neshkoro, the little village that could and did.

It all started in 2004 when the State Highway 73, the main street in Neshkoro, was torn up and monies were available to purchase some new trees. The Village Board formed a committee to help decide on improvements. That was the beginning of the Neshkoro Enhancement Committee and it was the spark that started it all. Once benches and trees were in place, residents witnessed how small improvements can create big change.

Like many small towns, Neshkoro has an active Lions Club, Lioness, and American Legion, as well as active church groups, all oriented to service. The spirit of volunteerism is strong.

From its inception, the Enhancement Committee has been made up of strong minded and strong willed people who like to make things happen or they wouldn't be there. That means meetings aren't always smooth. They work to consensus. The Enhancement Committee decided to do fund-raising to make more improvements when Main Street was completed. Fund raisers started with occasional sales of Krispie Krème doughnuts, and then moved to brat fries. Their eyes lit up when they saw we could raise a little money and then have the opportunity to decide what to do with it. Ideas went to the Neshkoro Village Board for agreement. Their projects include:

- A Memorial Park was built in a small parking lot across from the Post Office, with memorial bricks sold to help finance the cost.
- A larger park was built in a landfill area near the bridge crossing the White River in the center of the village. Trees were added, land was improved, a gazebo was built, and concerts are held

every Friday night all summer. Music has been provided by performers who would play for half of the proceeds from passing the hat. People started to come with lawn chairs and spend time with each other visiting like people used to do. Memorial donations from local residents purchased park benches.

- Neshkoro has several talented, professionally trained musicians and two of them, one a member of the Enhancement Committee, formed a Community Chorus that draws members from a number of nearby communities and performs in July and December every year. The chorus now numbers more than 50. The performances are free but the hat is passed and generally earns \$500. The July concert serves homemade pie and ice cream after the performance which again provides time for folks to linger and talk with each other. Choir members contribute to the cost of new music. The December performance has cookies and coffee and packages of homemade Christmas cookies are available for sale. Pies and cookies are made by choir members as another part of their partnership.
- A Home and Garden Tour began in 2008, with 5-6 homes and gardens featured, at a ticket cost of \$4-5. The revenue has been \$500 yearly. In 2011 more advertizing was used and \$1,000 was raised.
- In 2010 the Enhancement Committee began having a Scarecrow Festival. Local businesses, organizations and families or individuals were invited to make a scarecrow, set it up in the River's Edge gazebo park and folks voted for the best scarecrow. Vendors came and were charged \$25 to sell their wares. Small amusement ride vendors set up entertainment for children and there was live music and rides in a horse drawn wagon. The first year \$1,000 was made and the second year

\$2,000. The Enhancement Committee partnered with the Lions, Lioness', church groups, local businesses and Friends of the White River. Typically each of these organizations does their own fundraisers and this collaboration was a first for the village.

- An Enhancement Committee member joined a county Barn Quilt and Hidden History Mural Trail initiative. A brochure map highlighting locations of barn quilts and murals was created, funded partially by the Tourism Commission to encourage visitors to follow the numbers and travel around Marquette County. A website has also been established at [www.barnquiltsandmurals.com](http://www.barnquiltsandmurals.com).
- The Neshkoro Enhancement Committee donated \$2,500 to the mural project that it brought to Neshkoro in the summer of 2011. Three large murals have been completed and the fourth will be completed in 2012. A community mural was done working in partnership with a youth group in Neshkoro, seniors, church organizations and members of other civic groups.

Since 2004 the Neshkoro Enhancement Committee has raised more than \$75,000 mostly from hours spent in fund raising projects, and one contribution from Thrivent to help purchase sheet music for the Community Chorus.

The method has been simple, but not easy. A variety of fundraisers have taken place that provide an opportunity for people to work together for a cause and share a sense of pride from what their work can accomplish.

Neshkoro has drawn more visitors from other communities in Marquette County as well as from surrounding counties since these activities began. When the murals were being painted this summer, supported by more than 100 hours of volunteer time, people stopped daily to watch what was happening. Smiles were on

faces. A plaque on the mural wall says "Have Faith & Believe. See what a little village can do."

People nationwide are sad seeing more storefronts and businesses closed. People feel good when they see a community being spruced up. As the nomination said, "If we can do it, other communities can too".

Contact:  
Karen Holseth-Broekema  
W361 County Road DD  
Neshkoro, WI 54960  
920-205-0566  
karenhb1@yahoo.com