





STRONG  
WORKFORCE

**DEVELOPEMENT  
INITIATIVES**

*IN SAUK COUNTY, WISCONSIN*



*Sauk County is a rural county near the state capital of Madison, Wisconsin, with a population of 63,642. The Southern edge of Sauk County is only twenty-five miles northwest of the metropolitan area of Madison. On the Northeast side, it is anchored by Wisconsin Dells, a city that spans four counties along the Wisconsin River in an area of unique sandstone formations. Combined with the nearby village of Lake Delton, this area is a very popular tourist destination with many hotels, resorts, and waterparks; in fact, it is the "waterpark capital of the world."*

Written by Jen Hocken

**A**s a part of the Wisconsin Driftless Area, Sauk County was never touched by the nearby glaciers during the last ice age, and it now has an abundance of natural beauty with the deep ravines, bluffs and rock outcroppings. Baraboo, Wisconsin is home to the strikingly beautiful Devil's Lake State Park, a very popular natural resource that drew over three million visitors last year.

The main employers in the region are hotels, restaurants and water parks, followed closely by manufacturing, agriculture, and retail establishments. There are numerous water parks in the county including Noah's Ark Water Park and Mt. Olympus Water and Theme Park. The manufacturing industry is quite diverse, and the two largest cities in the county – Baraboo and Reedsburg – have developed a niche in plastics manufacturing including Flambeau, Inc. which has facilities across the U.S. and in the U.K., Mexico, and China, and Teel Plastics, Inc. that does contract work for companies around the world.



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The two cities are served by rail, which is necessary for the volume of product developed by the industry. Reedsburg is focused on manufacturing and brings people into the community to work since there are more jobs than there are working-age people in the city. One of the major employers in Reedsburg is Seats Incorporated, one of the most diverse seating manufacturers in the nation with products that are used in a wide variety of applications including: industrial trucks, over-the-highway semi-tractors, off-highway equipment, earth moving equipment, military vehicles and emergency vehicles. The company also manufactures low-speed electric vehicles for a related company, Columbia Vehicle Group, Inc.

The Sauk County Development Corporation (SCDC) performed a workforce study to accurately identify and address issues that are affecting economic growth in Sauk County. It then developed multiple workforce development initiatives to assist employers and municipalities in attraction and retention of the skilled labor force that is needed.

One of the Sauk County Development Corporation’s most successful workforce development programs established so far is the introduction of an ESL (English-as-a-second-language) program in Baraboo. There has been an influx of Hispanic

workers to the region, particularly in the Wisconsin Dells area where there are many positions in the hospitality and hotel industry. SCDC saw the potential to improve its workforce by assisting these workers with educational programs.

The mayor of Baraboo, Mike Palm, met with leaders in the Hispanic community and partnered with SCDC and Madison College – the local technical college – to get more information. After completing a survey, they established that the workers wished to improve their English skills and receive high school equivalency diplomas, since educational degrees received in Mexico do not transfer to the United States. A program was developed at the campus of U.W.-Baraboo/Sauk County, a two-year liberal arts college and a branch of the University of Wisconsin System. The college partnered with the Madison College instructors to provide Hispanic workers the education they required, and it is quite successful. The program began with sixty-five people last August and grew to the 161 adults who are enrolled today. There have been twenty-five people who completed the program and are now prepared to enter a more advanced job market or training program.

SCDC is also working with the Baraboo School District on a pilot program to increase teachers’ awareness of and engagement

with local businesses. “We’re working with them to get all of their teachers to tour local businesses, primarily in manufacturing, healthcare and other higher-skilled, higher-wage jobs. The goal is to make them aware of the careers available right here in Sauk County,” says Ed White, the Executive Director of the Sauk County Development Corporation. “You don’t have to leave and go to Minneapolis, Chicago or Milwaukee. You can have a career and earn a good living right here.” The technical education teachers already tend to connect with industry and internships, and this program will make more teachers aware of the opportunities available in our local communities.

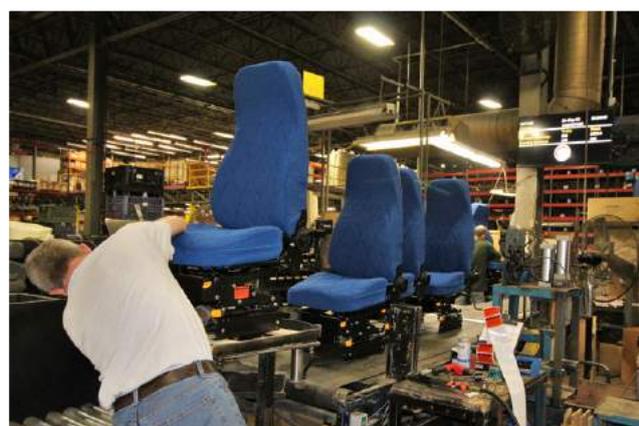
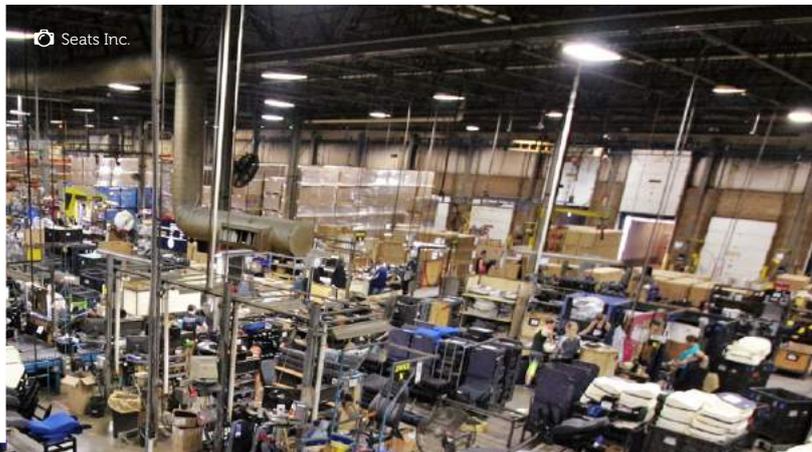
Recently, the first group of fifteen teachers toured two businesses in the area. One was MSA, an engineering firm, and the other was Del-Tool, a toolmaking company. The experience was eye-opening for many and got everyone discussing wages and the students’ ability to begin working in their late teens making twenty+ dollars an hour while their employer assists in paying for their education. SCDC is hoping to expand the program to all six school districts in the county to continue drawing attention to the potential of the region.

“We just don’t have enough folks going into manufacturing, and the numbers of students interested in manufacturing is not there. That’s over twenty percent of our jobs, and about twenty-five percent of wages, so proportionally, these are at the higher end of the jobs that we have,” says White.

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Another initiative that SCDC plans to begin next year is the “Come Home to Sauk County” Campaign. The campaign is focused on previous residents of the county who have been out of school for ten to fifteen years and are perhaps looking to move out of the city to settle down and start having children. One way of attracting people back to Sauk County instead of another area is to reach out when they are coming home for high school or college reunions with information about what career paths are available. If interested, they can explore the job opportunities while in town for the reunion and seriously consider a move back to Sauk County. It is an ideal situation for SCDC when it is able to achieve its workforce development goals while simultaneously improving the county as a whole.

SCDC will also begin working with the Department of Corrections to offer programs to low-risk offenders who are still incarcerated. The idea is to help them develop new and better skills, and to find good employment after being released. If this happens there is far less chance of recidivism, and ▶▶



- ▶ people who have earned their fresh start become valuable employees contributing to their community.

Ed White sits on the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin and is a part of the Youth Committee that works diligently with at-risk youth aged sixteen to twenty-four.

There is now a federal program called the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA) that targets out of school youth that have not graduated. "We try to get them into what we call middle college – which is college-level training in our technical

college system – to give them the skills to make them employable because that's the age where we're seeing higher unemployment," says White. It is a great program to help youth who have not graduated and do not have a good work history as they are more at risk for homelessness and drug addiction. "We are trying to offer opportunities for everybody because we need all the workers," says White.

The housing prices in Sauk County are still reasonable, yet they have risen by approximately ten percent in one year. The average

house value is \$188,000, which is \$25,000 higher than in the surrounding counties with the exception of Dane County. This means that it has become a more popular place to live, and that is driving the housing market. It is a new dilemma for SCDC to tackle, and the team is currently conducting a countywide housing study. Each community has different housing-related issues, and

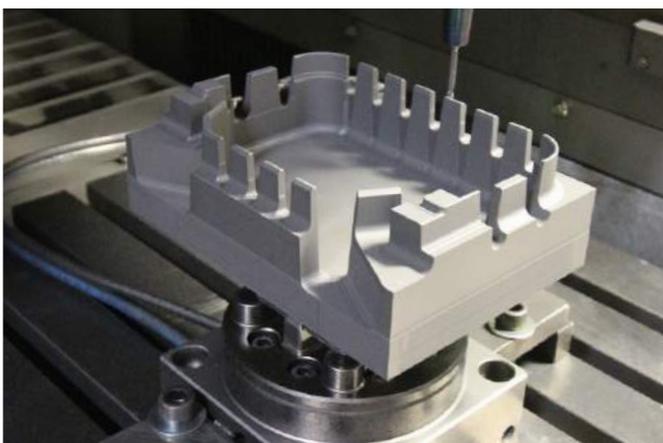
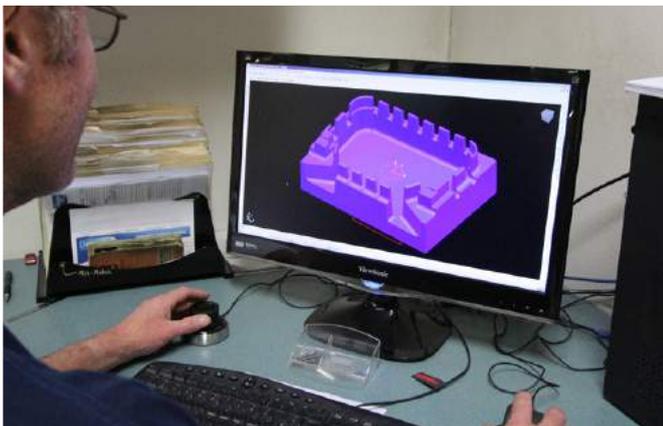
the closer you are to Madison, the higher the prices become.

The purpose of the housing study is to figure out where the gaps are and what residents are looking for. "We know that the next generation is buying

later. They are not buying as early as past generations did, so they are in apartments longer," says White. "We're trying to verify those facts for each community and come up with a plan and then attract developers."

Developers are more focused on the Madison Metro area, so SCDC is attempting to do some of the footwork to showcase what makes Sauk County appealing for investment. To nail down the specific housing needs of the county, it is developing a mini-plan for six of the communities that are participating

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in the housing study. The plans vary for each community since they have different zoning, rules and impact fees. “We’re setting up each community to be able to promote themselves as a place for housing development,” says White.

Sauk County is a great place to live for outdoor enthusiasts. There are exceptional hiking opportunities at Devil’s Lake State Park, and the Ice Age Trail, a well-known thousand-mile glacial geology trail through Wisconsin, runs through Sauk County. A well-known Baraboo area non-profit, The International Crane Foundation, is the only place in the world where all fifteen species of cranes can be found. Internationally recognized for its bird education and preservation programs, ICF works worldwide to conserve cranes and the ecosystems, watersheds, and flyways they

depend on. Similarly, the Aldo Leopold Foundation and Leopold Center near Baraboo carries on the work of its founder Aldo Leopold, the “father” of the “Land Ethic” and resource management to advance the understanding, stewardship and restoration of land health and to cultivate leadership for conservation.

Sauk County hosts many conferences and conventions in its luxurious resorts. Kalahari Resorts is adding 112,000 square feet of convention space to its existing facility and will soon have over 230,000 square feet of meeting space. The county is looking to attract bigger conferences to balance the water parks that primarily attract visitors in the summer. Most of the water parks under construction today are both indoor and outdoor to establish a year-round, more stable business. Noah’s Ark Waterpark has just opened a multi-million-dollar ride featuring a six-story water slide.

There is an abundance of opportunity for both employment and recreation in Sauk County. Its close proximity to Madison allows the residents in small communities in the county to experience a variety of culture and world-class entertainment. Small-town charm combined with the options that come from a diverse nearby metropolitan area make this a great place to live and work. “You can work, live and play here. You have all the opportunities that bigger cities would have, without any of the hassles,” says White. ■





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