

COMMUNITY-POWERED PARTNERSHIPS

How Anchor Institutions Can Support Local Growth

Anchor institutions can help play a vital role in community success. They hire community members, support local businesses, and act as resource hubs. This toolkit will help explain how to utilize large local organizations as anchors and set up a network to help facilitate long-term economic prosperity for your community.

WHAT IS AN ANCHOR INSTITUTION?

Anchor institutions are local organizations—both for-profit and nonprofit—that have a significant geographic or market presence in their community. The term *anchor* reflects their role in stabilizing and driving local economic activity through employment, purchasing power, and investment. While anchor institutions commonly refer to universities or hospitals, the term can also include community colleges, faith groups, and volunteer fire departments, among other organization types. Any local institution that drives a large portion of employment and brings capital into the town has the potential to serve as an anchor. These institutions can leverage their resources to support community growth through partnerships with local businesses, advocacy in local politics, and strategic investments.

HOW DO ORGANIZATIONS BECOME ANCHORS?

There are four key strategies that help institutions serve as anchors in their community: purchasing, employing, investing, and community involvement. Each of these methods creates a framework for sustainable, place-based economic development.

1. **Purchasing:** How is the anchor spending in town? For example, is the anchor supplying its gift shop with locally made products or buying furniture from local artisans?
2. **Employing:** How does the organization bring and support jobs in town? Is it hiring locally, bringing jobs to the community, or investing in the local talent pipeline?
3. **Investment:** What is the anchor's spending strategy? Is it buying local land to build new office space or working to make a place-based impact?
4. **Community impact:** How does the anchor interact with the local community? Is it they making an effort to participate in strategic planning or sitting on any local boards?

The following examples illustrate how communities have successfully used each of the four methods to nurture partnerships to make the most of anchor institutions' presence.

PURCHASING

Communities: Appleton and Neenah

Anchor institution: ThedaCare

The ThedaCare hospital in Appleton and Neenah is one example of how strategic purchasing can help both the anchor and the community. Working with the Northeast Wisconsin Food Hub, the hospital established a partnership to purchase the hospital's produce through the hub, an organization that supports farmers in Brown, Outagamie, and Winnebago counties. Through strategic purchasing, the hospital was able to cut down on shipping times for produce—since items were now being farmed in communities across the state rather than sourced from nationwide distributors—and at the same time, support their local farmers and businesses by circulating funds back into the local economy. This kind of strategic purchasing allows the anchor institution to provide healthier, fresher ingredients while supporting farmers and the local economic ecosystem.

EMPLOYING

Community: Gilman

Anchor institution: Gilman School District

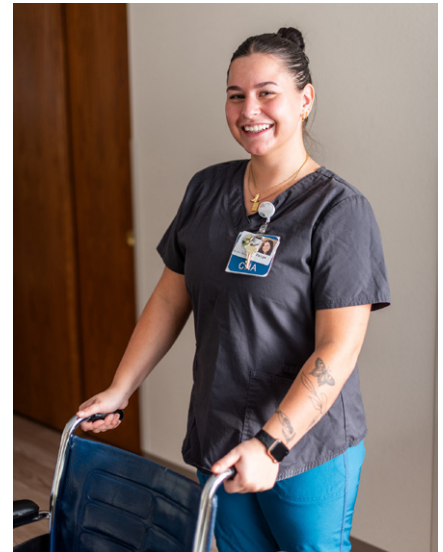
In Gilman, the local school district partnered with the University of Wisconsin Division of Extension through the Community Economic Analysis for Rural Wisconsin Communities (CEA-RWC) program to develop the Gilman School District Area Strategic Plan. In a community-oriented process, Gilman stakeholders identified priorities including cultivating a growth mindset, revitalizing Main Street, and strengthening community engagement. Translating these priorities into action led to reimagining local spaces—transforming an empty bank into the Vault Village retail and gathering space and a grocery store into a new community center called Celebrations Hall. Housing developments that were in need of renovation or no longer in use got new life as efficient, multi-unit developments. With its participation in Thrive Rural Wisconsin, Gilman completed a study of zoning laws in their county to identify ways to improve supply of affordable workforce housing and restructure zoning laws to enable growth. Through the support of the Gilman School District, Gilman was able to conduct studies that allowed them to identify opportunities and solutions—and then to put those solutions into practice. These efforts demonstrate how anchor institutions like school districts can drive community-wide development by investing in research, convening townspeople, and championing local priorities.

Thrive Rural Wisconsin addresses challenges rural communities raised through the Rural Voices Report that support community driven solutions to economic development challenges across rural Wisconsin and Tribal Nations. Communities that participate in Thrive Rural Wisconsin receive project management, financial support, and technical assistance to advance local and regional initiatives and connect them to the resources they need to be successful.

Community: Sheboygan County

Anchor institution: Lakeland University

The cooperative education program at Lakeland University in Sheboygan County offers another example of a workforce-driven anchor strategy. Facing a regional labor shortage, Lakeland University partnered with Sheboygan businesses to create a cooperative education program that allows students to earn course credits and get paid to work during school. The students have collectively earned more than \$10 million and receive investment coaching through the school to help pay off student loans and make smart investment decisions. The program also addresses a key issue facing rural communities: youth retention. By providing students with meaningful work opportunities during college—most of which end up in full-time offers for post-graduate students—the program helps young people envision a future for themselves in Sheboygan County. As Lakeland University Director of External Relations David Gallianetti says, “This program connects young talent to meaningful career opportunities but also strengthens their sense of belonging in the community.” Many of these opportunities culminate in full-time offers after graduation and provide students with crucial work experience they can leverage for other opportunities, helping sustain a cycle of young families choosing to put down roots locally.



Paige, a Lakeland student, works as a CNA for academic credit

INVESTING

Community: Hayward

Anchor institution: Tamarack Health Hospital System

In Hayward, the Tamarack Health hospital system partnered with the local school district to build a state-of-the-art fitness center in the high school, a project made possible through a community referendum that approved funding for vital school renovations, with the high school agreeing to pay for the additional renovations to the health facility. The hospital contributed all the gym equipment, community education courses, and marketing support. This facility is available to students and community members, offering monthly passes and day passes. The facility is open at no cost to students and at a low cost to community members. Beyond fitness, the center offers community education classes such as CPR training, music lessons, and fitness classes. As Tamarack Health President and CEO Luke Beirl says, “a healthy community is a strong community.” By creating this space, community members have a center to gather around beyond work and school, allowing them to connect to one another. This collaboration between the school and



Hayward seniors participate in fitness activities at the new facility.

the hospital is a shining example of how strategic institutional investments can create lasting community infrastructure and support the well-being of each community member.

Community: Fort Atkinson

Anchor institution: Fort HealthCare

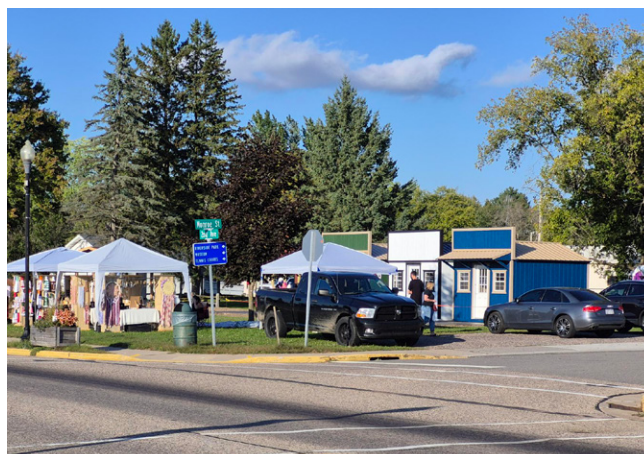
Fort HealthCare in Fort Atkinson offers another instructive example of an anchor institution investing in its community. Recognizing that housing availability was posing a barrier to community growth, the hospital worked with the Jefferson County Economic Development Organization to contribute \$3 million to the Thrive Live Local development fund, a low-interest fund that provides up to \$25,000 per unit for developers building affordable homes. The hospital also holds a seat on the Thrive board, maintaining ongoing engagement in community-level decision-making. James Nelson, senior vice president of finance and strategic development with the hospital, reflects, “The only thing holding us back is our own lack of imagination.” The hospital’s broader community commitments include a free clinic, hospice service, and a dental clinic, all symbolizing a lasting commitment between the hospital to strengthen the community’s health and economic resilience.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Community: Pittsville

Anchor institution: Pittsville School District

In Pittsville, the local school board and economic development group joined forces to identify and address the community’s most pressing needs. The school board led a community economic analysis with UW-Extension to uncover what kinds of projects would be best suited for the community’s needs. The school board also participated actively in the planning process



Pittsville's market village

to inform the community’s growth. As a part of Thrive Rural Wisconsin, the local economic development group CranCity Corner was registered as a 501(c)3 and created a community hub that will serve as a gathering space, foster new business development, and provide housing. The city also used a \$29,000 Vibrant Spaces Grant to create a market village—a space that will serve as a micro-incubator for businesses, with four small vendor booths with vintage commercial façades, and will also serve as a pillar for the community to hold gatherings and connect to one another. Pittsville’s success reflects what becomes possible when anchor institutions like schools, local government, and small business owners work together toward shared goals. These kinds of community partnerships model the integrated community leadership that enables projects to move from ideation to implementation.

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