



Wausau, Wisconsin's Homesteading Program Transforms Homes, Employer Relationships



Live It Up powers a city's economic, development engine



Is it possible for a city to recruit new talent, increase home ownership, improve employer-employee relationships, and engage local workers in their neighborhoods using a single program? The City of Wausau thinks so.

Launching earlier this year, Wausau's Live It Up homesteading program was created to encourage young professionals in the area to stay by helping them purchase a house. The idea is simple: Partner with local businesses to provide no interest loans to employees and young professionals to buy a home and in turn, they'll plant roots in the community. So far, it's working. 12 loans have been awarded and over 20 businesses are financially supporting the program.

"Live It Up leverages businesses support with city resources. Live It Up is purposefully not a city program; it's a community partnership working

towards a more locally connected and rooted workforce. We used the term 'homesteading' specifically because it evokes the idea of pioneers on the frontier that are coming and rushing to a new territory and staking their claim. That's what we're inspiring," stated Christian Schock, Director of Planning, Community & Economic Development for the City.

The program's first loan recipient, Brett Opal-Wahoske supports the notion that Live It Up is not only enabling him to plant roots, but also strengthen his employer relationship. He remarked, "Participation in the Live It Up Wausau program certainly has shown me that my employer (Benedictine Living Community of Wausau) values my employment and intends on me being a part of their future. In turn, I intend to do the same."

Local realtor and loan recipient Carrie Marohl comments, "The program is refreshing because it isn't income restrictive. Most people have a hard time

coming up with a down payment. This program alleviates that challenge. Plus, it provides the perfect incentive to get people buying and investing in older homes."

Loans through Live It Up Wausau can start at \$10,000 and are repaid over five years without interest. The last year's payment can be forgiven if improvements are made on the home. Participants buying a home in a historic part of the city, or one older than 50 years, can receive a larger loan. Local businesses participate by financially supporting the fund and promoting it with their employees. The City's part of the funding comes from a special tax district, which has funding set aside for housing programs.



Blake Opal-Wahoske, Brett's husband and assistant director at Wausau River District shares, "There is a very special sense of community in downtown Wausau - you feel like you are part of something greater. I'm so glad we can be a part of it."