



# Millennials Want Out of Big Cities?!

## Where Will They Go?

➤➤➤ One small Wisconsin city has the answer



When Lindsey Lewitzke left her central Wisconsin home for college in 2007, she had no intentions of returning.

“I left for school, and after college graduation, took my first job in the Twin Cities. I had no plans to ever move back,” shared Lewitzke. “I didn’t feel like Wausau had enough to offer me.”



Fast forward nine years and you’ll find Lewitzke, 26, happily right back in the middle of the exact place she had no intentions of returning. “Wausau has completely evolved these last few years. It is a different place. I wanted to be back. I needed to be a part of it.”



It’s true. It seems everywhere you look, Wausau is transforming. From street art installations and farm to table restaurants, to sell out community festivals, outdoor concerts, and an \$80 million downtown river-front redevelopment, Wausau is progressing. And at a perfect time too. The single largest

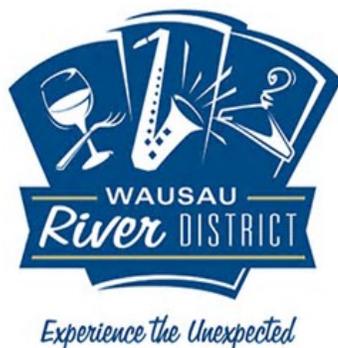
cohort of millennials were those born in 1990. They turned 25 last year. Powell Myers, an urban planning professor at USC calls this group “Peak Millennials,” and argues that they are the inflection point that will start returning urban/suburban living patterns to their historical norms. Meaning, millennials are beginning to leave the big cities. But where will they go?

Nielsen is calling them “urban burbs” — developments built to be walkable, and include a mix of living and retail space, while still offering affordable, larger houses. And the release of 2014 Census data supported it: Millennials have indeed started moving out of the big city—and fleeing to places made for them, by them. They are revitalizing and investing in smaller cities that provide a high quality of life with an affordable price tag.

Do these places exist in the Midwest? The answer is yes, and a per-

fect example is in the middle of Wisconsin. Wausau has been transforming itself throughout the last decade. And Marathon County is expecting a 2% increase in its population by the end of the year given its rising educational, recreational and economic opportunities. How do they do it? And what can other cities learn from them?





**Leadership:** Two positions that have been instrumental in the transformation of the city are held by millennials. Elizabeth Brodek, 30, took over leadership of Wausau's River District in 2014 after relocating from another part of the state. Ask any local and you'll find her efforts have led to the creation of a vibrant center of commerce and community life anchored by 250 downtown business owners throughout a 34 square block area. And the dollars prove it. According to statistics from the WEDC between July 2015 and June 2016, downtown River District customers spent about \$8.1 million at restaurants and \$101.2 million at retail stores. Within the past year, the organization's events have created an estimated \$1.96 million in economic impact in the River District.

In 2014, Lewitzke accepted the Executive Director position at Wausau Events - the organization responsible for producing the lion's share of community events. From weekly concerts, winter beer festivals, and downtown farmer's markets, to the state's longest running blues fest, the organization has hosted just under 100,000 people at their events so far this year. And take a look at

the city's annual 20 under 40 recognition award program. You'll quickly see how influential young leaders are to the progression of the city. "We've been incredibly fortunate to be able to build on the momentum of previous leaders, and have the support of the city and community throughout the process," stated Field.

**Development:** Development is also key, as millennials are attracted to cities that provide a mix of living, retail and recreational space. The city's East Riverfront Redevelopment project is the next generation of Wausau's revitalization. The \$80 million downtown improvement project broke ground this past spring, and is the biggest, most elaborate development project the city has ever seen. At its conclusion, the project will revamp over 16 acres of prime Wisconsin River waterfront using a mix of recreational, residential, office, retail, and public green space.

"Knowing our urban waterfront was critically important to the city's sustainability and growth, Wausau's leaders over a decade's time had the will and foresight to assemble, remediate and replan these former industrial parcels," stated Christian Schock, Wausau's

Community and Economic Development Director. "We now have a viable, mixed-use neighborhood with a heavy focus on high-end housing which we foresee attracting residents to our downtown. In turn, these individuals will build an important tax base and at the same time, diversify the city's housing typology and amenities to continue attracting and retaining new residents."

**Housing:** Recognizing employees are one of the city's greatest economic development assets, Wausau's Live It Up homesteading program proactively supports workforce attraction and retention through no interest home loans for employees.

Blake Opal-Wahoske, 27, recently purchased his first home in the downtown area after he and his husband received the program's first loan. Stated Blake, "There is a very special sense of community in downtown Wausau - you feel like you are part of something greater. The restaurants, music, big city vibe in such a small



feel like you are part of something greater. The restaurants, music, big city vibe in such a small intimate setting. I'm so glad I can be a part of it."

Additionally, numerous recent housing developments have taken root in the city's downtown, including the River East Brownstones project, which upon its completion will offer the city's first row house-style homes. The project received the national Brownfield Renewal Magazine award, recognizing a brownfield site development that best demonstrates positive economic impacts including job creation.

**Opportunity:** Opportunity is also a critical element, and Wausau appears to be nailing it. Wausau anchors a growing combined metropolitan statistical area of over 308,000 people. (Source: [Wausau Community Development](#)) Its expanding businesses remain strong with nationally — and globally — recognized firms in diverse fields. Young Professional programs abound including the Wausau Chamber of Commerce's E3YP group and United Way Emerging Leaders. The opening of a new medical school campus is a rare event and Wausau celebrated the launch of the Medical College of

Wisconsin-Central Wisconsin campus in August. Wausau's recently expanded Business Campus now includes over 1,000 acres of commercial and industrial properties and is home to the city's Entrepreneurial and Education Center (EEC). The EEC assists businesses and entrepreneurs by offering resources to establish and accelerate business growth.

Locals call it the incubator because it does just that - assists small businesses with getting off the ground. This has led to an exciting mix of new businesses in the area, from a World Market that houses 28 entrepreneurs of diverse backgrounds, to one of the city's most beloved cup-cakeries.

**Location:** Centrally positioned in the middle of the state, Wausau is easy to get to and from, with Milwaukee, Chicago and Minneapolis just a few hours drive from its door. The Wisconsin River, and its nationally recognized whitewater course, runs through the city's downtown corridor, offering outdoor enthusiasts a perfect escape just blocks from the city center. Within a 10-minute drive from downtown, residents are greeted with Rib Mountain State Park, boasting

year round hiking and recreation, plus skiing and snowboarding during the winter.

**Income and crime:** The city of 39,000, has the highest share of middle income residents — 67% of the population — of any of more than 200 metropolitan areas examined by Pew researchers. Additionally, Wausau's rates of murder and larceny are among the nation's lowest for small cities with populations under 200,000.

Bring it all together and Wausau has what influencers say is the magic recipe for attracting and retaining millennials. And when you look at leaders such as Field, Lewitzke, Opal-Wahoske and numerous others, it's clear to see the city is successfully positioning itself to attract this next generation.



It's an exciting time to be a part of this community," stated Lewitzke. "My husband and I are proud to call Wausau home and we are happy to plant our roots here."

