



**Economic  
Development and  
Growing the  
Economy**

**UW  
Extension**

# Profiles of Best Practices

## **Capturing Outside Dollars—Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center**

### **Community, County**

Bayfield and Ashland Counties

### **Area of Project Impact**

Bayfield and Ashland Counties

### **Population Affected**

31,879

### **Situation**

A group of local citizens and local, state and federal government officials recognized a need to provide a vehicle to attract, inform and educate visitors about the unique historical, cultural and natural resources of the Northern Great Lakes Region, which includes the northern areas of Wisconsin and Minnesota and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan touching the shores of three Great Lakes – Superior, Michigan and Huron.

### **Economic Development Strategies**

A strategy was developed to seek outside funding to construct a proposed four-season visitor/ interpretative center that would introduce, inform and educate visitors about the unique qualities of the Northern Great Lakes Region. It was felt that this center had the potential to be a major visitor destination and tourist attraction and that it could play a significant role in promoting tourism in the area and have a major economic impact on Bayfield and Ashland Counties.

### **Implementation**

In 1987, the University of Wisconsin–Extension was asked to assist, and conducted a study titled, “University of Wisconsin Ashland/ Bayfield Visitor/Interpretive Center Workshop Report.” Using federal funding, the University of Wisconsin–Extension also prepared a November 1989 report to Congress titled, “A Proposed Visitor Center for the Northern Great Lakes Region.” Both the Bayfield and Ashland County Boards adopted resolutions supporting construction of the proposed center. State funds were provided to prepare a site selection analysis, and a preliminary site plan and architectural concept for the center.

The proposed center was identified as one of the top tourism issues for Superior Days and Bayfield County 2000 Conferences held in the early 1990s. The selected center site was just west of the intersection of Highways 2 and 13 in Bayfield County west of the city of Ashland. The U.S. Forest Service agreed to be the lead agency in 1990 and purchased land for the center site in 1991 with a \$250,000 federal appropriation. Architectural design plans for the center were completed in 1993. The U.S. Forest Service committed funds in 1994 for a sewer line extension from the city of Ashland and an access road to the construction site. Matching funds from Congress and the Wisconsin Legislature were approved to construct the \$7 million Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center and its exhibits. The center opened in May 1998.

### **Partners and Leadership**

The Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center represents the culmination of a unique partnership between local, state and federal governments and private organizations, businesses and individuals that included: U S Forest Service, National Park Service, University of Wisconsin–Extension, Wisconsin Department of Tourism, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Ashland and Bayfield Counties, City of Ashland, numerous chambers of commerce, Ashland Area Development Corporation and the Friends of the Center Alliance Ltd.

## **Outcomes**

A four-season Northern Great Lake Visitor Center is now located in the Bayfield/Ashland County area that provides historical and natural interpretation/exhibits; environmental and cultural educational programs; comprehensive visitor information services; and a regional historical archive. During the year 2001, 114,237 persons visited the center.

## **Contact**

Tim Kane, CRD Agent  
Bayfield County UW-Extension Office  
Courthouse  
P.O. Box 218  
Washburn, WI 54891  
(715) 373-6104

Steve Hoecker, Director  
Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center  
29270 County Hwy. G  
Ashland, WI 54806  
(715) 685-9983