



## Main Street and Connect Communities Program

### Program Guidelines for Fiscal Year 2026

**Lead Division:** Business and Community Development

New       Revised 7/1/2025

Grant       Loan       Tax Credit       Technical Assistance

### Introduction

**Background Information:** WEDC provides technical assistance to communities in the planning, management, and implementation of strategic development projects in downtowns and urban neighborhoods. This includes Main Street support and Connect Communities, which is aimed at supplementing the Main Street program by expanding services to more downtowns across the state. WEDC will maintain partnerships and develop new ones with other state and local public and private entities such as the UW-Extension and USDA Rural Development to provide services to municipalities undertaking downtown revitalization projects.

WEDC will annually develop a plan that describes the objectives of the state Main Street Program and the methods for 1) coordinating with public and private sector, 2) soliciting private sector funds for revitalization of business areas, and 3) helping municipalities engage in revitalization with help from interested individuals and organizations.<sup>1</sup> WEDC matches technical assistance from our own staff, the National Main Street Center and outside consultants to needs of respective municipalities and non-profit organizations. WEDC will also work with local communities to set strategies to solicit funding from the private sector in those communities to support the local downtown revitalization effort.

**Program's Purpose:** The Main Street program is designed to increase local capacity to carry out projects and initiatives, increase the organizational effectiveness of entities working on revitalization issues, increase the public and private investment in downtown areas and, by extension, reduce vacancy and increase property values in the Main Street member districts.

### Eligibility Requirements

**Eligible Applicants:** Applicants eligible for Main Street and Connect Communities are communities or urban neighborhoods with a central or core business district and demonstrated local commitment to preservation and revitalization activities. Regional entities may apply for the Connect Communities program on behalf of multiple communities (1,000 or less in population) within their region. Regional coordinators commit to meeting program attendance, sharing information and collecting annual reporting information from participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Wis. Stat. § 238.127(2)(c)



**Eligible Use of Funds:** As a technical assistance program, no funding is directly provided. Technical assistance is given in the form of training, façade renderings, small business consultations, and hiring of outside consultants to address topics such as business recruitment and retention, branding, historic preservation planning and event development.

**Matching:** There are no matching requirements for this technical assistance.

## Available Incentives

**FY26:** \$292,500 (non-aids contracting) consisting of

\$242,500 WEDC Funds

\$50,000 Private Funding

**Award Sizes:** As a technical assistance program, awards are provided as staff time for approved, enrolled communities.

## Activities and Expected Outcomes

Assist 37 Main Street communities, two new communities in FY26; 95 Connect Communities, plus 5 new communities in FY26, and 150 small businesses.

**Impact:** Communities should see an increase in their local capacity to carry out projects and initiatives, increase the organizational effectiveness of entities working on revitalization issues, increase the public and private investment in downtown areas and, by extension, reduce vacancy and increase property values in the Main Street member districts.

**Reporting:** Main Street – includes monthly reporting on all Connect Communities data, plus the following:

- Number of events and attendance
- New open or closed housing units
- Development or demolition and value
- Property sales or use changes

Connect Communities – annual survey includes:

- New and expanded businesses, jobs created
- Closed or moved out businesses, jobs lost
- Private investments in downtown, public investments in downtown
- Events of initiative launched
- Wisconsin Main Street services used
- Volunteer hours for downtown efforts

## Application Guideline



**Timeline:** The Main Street application process is competitive. Main Street applicants must be an active Connect Communities participant for at least one year prior to applying for Main Street. Eligible applicants must submit a letter of intent to apply for Main Street to the Program Manager by December 1<sup>st</sup> of the prior year.

Communities interested in the Connect Communities program submit an application to be considered in one of two annual application periods.

**Review Considerations:** WEDC will take the following into account when considering Main Street or Connect Communities applications<sup>2</sup>:

- Organizational capability: An applicant’s ability to bring financial and volunteer resources together according to the National Main Street Center’s four-point approach to downtown revitalization.
- Public Sector Commitment<sup>3</sup>: The participation from local government in the form of financial and staff commitment to the local downtown revitalization effort.
- Private Sector Commitment<sup>4</sup>: The participation from local businesses and individuals in the form of financial<sup>5</sup> and volunteer commitment to the local downtown revitalization effort.
- Financial Capacity: The ability of the community to bring together comprehensive financial resources to adequately support the downtown revitalization program. For Main Street Communities, this includes funds to employ a local program manager to manage the effort for at least five years.<sup>6</sup> Communities with populations of 5,000 or more must employ a full-time, paid program manager and meet a minimum budget requirement. Communities of less than 5,000 must employ a half-time program manager and meet a minimum budget requirement. A community’s ability and commitment to hiring design consultants<sup>7</sup> and providing training<sup>8</sup> will also be taken into consideration.
- Need: Applicants must show that they need the Connect Communities or Main Street Program. This need is exhibited by vacancy rate, excessive competition from competing areas, blight, building deterioration, and business mix issues.
- Physical Capacity: An applicant’s ability to show that they have sufficient building stock, businesses and a recognizable downtown district.
- Historic Integrity: An applicant’s existing historic resources downtown and genuine interest in saving and restoring their historic structures. WEDC will employ a Design Specialist to assist Main Street communities with design plans.

In addition to these criteria, local Main Street communities must commit to training and sharing downtown revitalization information with communities that do not participate in the Main Street Program.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wis. Stat. § 238.127(2)(f)

<sup>3</sup> Wis. Stat. § 238.127(2)(f)1

<sup>4</sup> Wis. Stat. § 238.127(2)(f)1

<sup>5</sup> Wis. Stat. § 238.127(2)(f)2

<sup>6</sup> Wis. Stat. § 238.127(2)(f)3

<sup>7</sup> Wis. Stat. § 238.127(2)(f)4

<sup>8</sup> Wis. Stat. § 238.127(2)(f)5

<sup>9</sup> Wis. Stat. § 238.127(2)(h)



## **How to Apply:**

### Main Street:

- The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation will annually select up to three new Main Street communities based on applications submitted to WEDC. Main Street applicants must be an active Connect Communities participant for at least one year prior to applying for Main Street. Eligible applicants must submit a letter of intent to apply for Main Street to the Program Manager by December 1<sup>st</sup> of the prior year. Applicants will then host an on-site workshop with local stakeholders to discuss the application process, followed by completion of the written application and in-person interview.
- The Main Street application process is competitive. When applications are received, they go to an outside committee that is selected annually. Committee members have backgrounds related to downtown development. The committee will review applications and in-person presentations from applicants and make a recommendation to management. As this is a technical assistance program, no funds are awarded.

### Connect Communities:

- Communities interested in the Connect Communities program submit an application to be considered in one of two annual application periods. Applications are reviewed by WEDC staff, and the recommendations are approved by management.

**Award Process:** When Main Street applications are received, they go to an outside committee that is selected annually. Main Street communities are approved by WEDC leadership annually while Connect Communities are approval semi-annually.

**Performance Reporting:** Main Street participants will be required to submit a periodic performance report documenting new businesses, new jobs, buildings rehabilitated, public improvements, attendance at promotional events, new downtown housing units, volunteer hours, as well as any other contract deliverable.

Connect Communities will report annually on local activities including investment, businesses, jobs, volunteer activity and accomplishments for the duration of their program participation.

WEDC may impose additional reporting requirements to evaluate project performance and to ensure compliance with contract deliverables.



## Revision History

### **Program Inception** – 1987 Wisconsin Act 109 – Fiscal Year 1987

- 7/1/2019: Added statutory citations; simplified Program Description; clarified Expected Outcomes.
- 7/1/2020: Clarified awards and application process and performance reporting requirements.
- 7/1/2022: Expands eligibility for regional entities to apply for Connect Community status on behalf of smaller communities.