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The Wisconsin Community that

KEEPS ON

GROWING



Written by Claire Suttles

Being part of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul market that is home to a wide range of thriving businesses, St. Croix County delivers major metro advantages while offering unique benefits. The Wisconsin community provides a wealth of advantages for families seeking a high quality of life in a semi-rural location. ►►



▶“St. Croix County is very family friendly,” says Melissa Meschke, Executive Director at St. Croix Economic Development Corporation. “We’re close to big city amenities but still have small-town living.”

The historic downtowns of Hudson, New Richmond, and River Falls feature locally owned shops, farm-to-table restaurants, breweries, and distilleries, making them a destination for foodies and tourists as well as locals. St. Croix National Scenic Riverway and Willow River State Park are also popular destinations for both residents and tourists. “We have tons of outdoor recreation,” says Meschke. “We have a huge number of trails. It really is a great place to raise a family. I, myself, have two little kids, so I can say that firsthand.”

Local school districts are “consistently ranked among the best in the state, offering a variety of academic and extracurricular programs that attract families to the area,” Meschke shares, and the county’s post-secondary education network is also noteworthy. The University of Wisconsin – River Falls, Northwood Technical College, and Chippewa Valley Technical College are all located within St. Croix County. “They’re great partners in the community,” she says. “They’re constantly working with local employers and businesses and other organizations to educate and build workforce pipelines while also providing a lot of opportunities for lifelong learning.”

“The communities are very welcoming and there’s a lot of opportunity here in St. Croix County.”

Ease of transportation is another critical advantage. The entire county is within an hour of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport and sits along major roadways. “We have tons of arteries with our local highway systems, including I-94 that runs right through the middle of St. Croix County and a lot of our communities along the way,” says Meschke. “I-94 comes all the way from Chicago and goes all the way to the Twin Cities, which gives a high level of important visibility when it comes to St. Croix County.”

The county has a sizable airport within its borders. The New Richmond Regional Airport serves more than 175,000 people in Western Wisconsin and Eastern Minnesota. With a 5,500-foot-long runway—the second longest of the business airports in the Twin Cities area—the airport can handle almost any business aircraft. 272 aircraft are based there, the most in Wisconsin at any one airport. It also has the most hangars, at 121.

St. Croix Crossing has given the county an even greater logistical advantage. Opened in 2017, the four-lane bridge spans the





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St. Croix River to connect Minnesota and Wisconsin. "This was a game changer for the economy here in St. Croix County," Meschke says. "It was a key connection to make our communities more accessible for residents and businesses."

The county has grown by 7,346 people over the last five years and is projected to grow by an additional 5,465 people by 2030. "I think a big part of what makes us consistently one of the fastest growing counties in the state is that location close to Minnesota. We do get a lot of people who move here that used to live on the Minnesota side, whether it be for tax reasons or housing cost reasons, who want to come across the border and live here, which is great."

Currently, St. Croix County has 35 municipalities, and 21 of those have at least 2,000 residents each. While these communities are a popular destination for people coming from Minnesota, they also attract newcomers from around the country. "We've got a lot of really great small to medium-size communities here in the county that are great attractors for people from all over," Meschke says. "One of the things I personally love about living here is that it really is kind of a melting pot of people. If you're not originally from here, I think the communities are very welcoming and there's a lot of opportunity here in St. Croix County that I just personally love as a mom of two. We are very happy we relocated here in 2021." ➤

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▶ Local and state leadership are committed to being pro-business, creating an ideal environment for businesses looking to start up, relocate, or expand. “The county works really hard to be pro-business, pro-landowner rights with an approach that is focused on ‘finding a way to get to yes,’” Meschke says. “They’ve minimized the tax levy. We continue to have low sales and use tax (5.5 percent), a nearly 2 percent lower corporate income tax compared to Minnesota. and rank within the top five for the ‘Best states for opportunity.’”

This pro-business attitude is reflected in local business growth. From 2014 to 2024, the number of establishments in the county grew from 3,312 to 3,658. “Our pre-pandemic high was 3,755,” Meschke says. “So we’re coming back up on that 2019 number quite rapidly, looking at the trends. And then we grew from 30,550 jobs to 33,890 jobs in that same 10-year period; our pre-pandemic high in 2019 was 34,942. We’re starting a lot of small businesses, which is great.”



The St. Croix Valley Business Innovation Center helps local startups find a strong foothold. The City of River Falls, Chippewa Valley Technical College, River Falls Economic Development Corp, and University of Wisconsin – River Falls have together created this incubation program to provide mentorship and office, food-ready, manufacturing, and coworking space. “To have that type of active community support and multiple organizations supporting the business incubator is really unique nationally,” Meschke says. “More importantly, the Innovation Center connects all the resources and the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the St. Croix Valley. The Small Business Development Center is housed there as well as the St. Croix EDC. This comprehensive approach helps us build important camaraderie, friendships, and teamwork among the businesses that are located there,” she says.

“It’s the only incubator in the Western Wisconsin area,” she continues. “It’s been wonderful to watch their growth and success. Incubators can be really challenging to keep open and keep funded, and [the partners have] done a great job to keep it running very well.”

The positive impact is clear. Over the past seven years, 26 businesses have graduated from the program, 95 percent relocated in the region, and 87 percent are still in business, Meschke says. Compare this to the national average of business startups that remain open, which is 50 percent. “Our members have created 136 jobs, retained 184 jobs, and infused \$34.1 million of capital into the economy. Today, 19 businesses operate at the Innovation Center, occupying 80 percent of the space and employing nearly 90 people.” Currently, there are 2,000 square feet of industrial space, 7,000 square feet of build-to-suit second-floor space, private offices, suites, and co-working and designated workstation spaces available. Dr. Sheri Marnell, the Executive Director, loves giving tours of the facility. Reach out if you want to learn more at www.stcroixinnovation.org.

New Richmond Regional Airport is about to offer additional services to local businesses as well. “The airport is undergoing a comprehensive airport master plan with expected completion in the fall of 2025,” Meschke tells us. “The plan calls for a new hangar area that will accommodate 19 private and 10 corporate and business hangars in 2026, a security fence and gate project in 2026, a major taxiway reconstruction in 2027, north hangar area pavement reconstruction in 2028, and a significant runway improvement project in 2032.”

The development doesn’t stop there. “The City of River Falls invested about \$20 million to develop Mann Valley Corporate Park. They put in all the curbs and gutters, all the utilities,



and have shovel-ready land available. Many companies have expressed interest in this new business park, and construction will begin soon.”

Mann Valley Corporate Park offers more than 200 acres that are ideal for office, light industrial, and manufacturing use, just minutes from I-94. At a whopping 155 acres, the park’s flagship lot is one of the largest tracts of available industrial land in the entire Twin Cities metro area.

Looking ahead, county leaders are focusing on housing as well as business. “We are just about to complete a comprehensive housing study in St. Croix County,” Meschke shares. “It will give us a lot of data about the housing that has been built—there has been a lot—but also opportunities for what we are missing, really thinking about housing for all. This will help us work more effectively and strategically with developers to make sure that we are bringing to the market housing for everyone as we look at continuing this massive growth.”

With so much to offer, growth is on the horizon in St. Croix County. This area is ready to welcome newcomers and continues to maintain a high quality of life for those who already call this incredible place home. ■

Content Developed by Steve Finn

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