

Florence rebounds; votes for Donald Trump and improved schools

Barry Adams | Wisconsin State Journal
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FLORENCE — Wreath production was winding down last week at Kraig Soderberg's American Balsam shop that in the summer months sells fireworks.

Across the street at Steber Seed, a self-serve kiosk was stocked with sacks of sugar beets, shelled corn, carrots and apples for hunters trying to increase their odds of bagging a buck.

Logging trucks stacked with pine, maple and oak rumbled through this northeastern Wisconsin town with regularity, while at the Community Center preparations were underway for the annual hunter's supper, an all-you-can-eat Italian chicken and spaghetti fundraiser put on by the Masonic Lodge.

The county of about 4,500 people that borders Michigan's Upper Peninsula is one of the poorest and least populated in the state, has no stop lights and no cities or villages, and made headlines when, in 2005, the School Board voted to dissolve the school district. That same year, 76 jobs from a golf tee manufacturer moved to China. The grocery store closed a year later followed in 2010 by the hardware store.

But while the county's unemployment rate of 5.2 percent is one of the highest in the state, this community has slowly rebounded with redevelopment in downtown Florence and expansion at the county's largest private employer, Florence Hardwoods. The grocery store reopened in 2014 and the former hardware store is now a St. Vincent de Paul store that last week included blaze orange clothing, Nativity scenes and ornaments.

A Family Dollar store opened in 2015, there is talk of a new hotel and the construction of a \$5 million assisted-living facility that could begin in 2017 and employ 25 people.

The school district never closed after voters in late 2005 approved a \$4.75 million operating referendum to keep the doors of the district open. Two more operating referendums followed. But another step in the economic and social recovery in the state's most conservative county came earlier this month.

It was no surprise that 71.6 percent of the voters cast 1,897 ballots for Donald Trump. But many of those same voters also approved on Nov. 8 two referendum questions totaling \$14.5 million for additions and improvement to school buildings, one constructed in 1930.

That history has changed. It's not what it was. We really reached out to the whole community," said Ben Niehaus, superintendent of the 369-student Florence County School District, that 20 years ago had more than 900 students. "We're really doing a lot of great things and I think we're being looked upon as a leader in rural Wisconsin education."

School improvements

The \$13.2 million in improvements from the first question reduces the footprint of the combined middle and high school by 10,000 square feet to 97,000 square feet but creates a more efficient use of space, school officials say. A 1956 addition will be demolished and the 1930s section renovated. The project also includes the addition of four classrooms, a secure main entrance, a new kitchen and upgrading restrooms so they are ADA compliant.

Another \$1.3 million will be used for renovations to the art room, science labs and family and consumer education classroom. The technical education department will also be reconfigured to better use the \$100,000



Ben Niehaus, superintendent of the Florence County School District, checks in at the district office last week, located in a section of the high school constructed in 1930. The district was close to dissolving in 2005 but voters since that time approved three operating referendums to keep the district afloat. Earlier this month, voters approved two referendums totaling \$14.5 million that will expand and upgrade school facilities. [Buy Now](#)

Fabrication Laboratory, a creative space for students and the community that includes 3-D printers, a laser engraver, CNC router, a vinyl cutter and computers with a variety of software programs.

The lab, established in 2015, is designed to encourage entrepreneurship, creativity and problem solving. Those using the lab also have access to lathes and saws in the woodshop and a plasma cutter in the metal shop. A \$20,000 CNC router that can hold a full sheet of plywood recently arrived and was paid for through a grant.

Last Wednesday night, Mary Brunette, who lives on Mirror Lake and works at the Verso paper mill in Quinnesec, Michigan, used a computerized engraver to personalize a series of wine glasses, each with a name and an image of a crappie. Robert Duby, 81, used a plasma cutter to burn through a 1/8-inch sheet of steel to make a hanger in the shape of a pine tree for a fireplace poker.

The lesson was more tangible Thursday morning for Joshua Sonkowsky, 16. The junior had set up a 3-D printer the day before and had planned to let it run overnight to make a plastic shotgun shell holder that attaches to a belt for skeet shooting. The printer, however, wasn't loaded with enough plastic, and the \$27 project failed.

"It was my mistake. I should have measured how many grams I needed of the material and I failed to do that," said Sonkowsky, who has plans to enlist in the Coast Guard. "It's me losing money."

Like in most, the school system, which exceeds expectations according to the latest state report card, is seen as an integral part of the community. The 495-square-mile district, 80 percent of which is forestland, covers the entire county and some students can ride the bus for three hours a day. The district's eight bus routes combine for 600 miles per day for buses that get about seven miles per gallon. New buses are a luxury and repairs more the norm.

"You just don't have an open checkbook," said John Zoppetti, 59, who runs a 48-mile route twice a day and has been a bus driver for 34 years. "You make things run."

Infrastructure upgrades

But it's not just the schools that are being improved in this county where the median household income is just over \$40,000 compared to the state average of \$51,500.



Jeanette Bomberg, chairwoman of the Florence County Board, stands outside the historic courthouse and jail, both constructed in 1889. The courthouse is still used for government purposes but the jail, no longer in use, is a tourist attraction in the northeastern Wisconsin community.



Robert Duby, 81, watches as a plasma cutter burns through a sheet of steel in the metal shop at Florence High School. Duby was taking part last week in a program at the school's Fab Lab that allows community members and students to use computers, 3D printers, engravers and other high tech machinery. A recently approved referendum will reconfigure the tech ed department to better mesh with the Fab Lab, one of only two in Wisconsin. Duby was using the machinery to cut out a piece of steel in the shape of a pine tree that will be used to hang a fireplace poker.

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Orange barrels and construction equipment gave Florence an urban feel for months this year as antiquated water and sewer lines and sidewalks were replaced. The \$2.75 million project, paid in part with a more than \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program, touched 27 blocks.

Tim and Jeanette Bomberg, both 54, say the project is another positive sign for the community. The Bombergs are not only husband and wife but community leaders. Tim is the town chairman of Florence, does maintenance work and drives a school bus and gravel truck. His grandfather started the hardware store in town. Jeanette works at Pride Manufacturing and has been on the 12-member County Board for 22 years, the last seven as chairwoman.

“It was a scary time and now our school district is thriving,” Jeanette said, recalling 2005. “We have come so far. There’s a lot to be proud of in our little part of the state.”

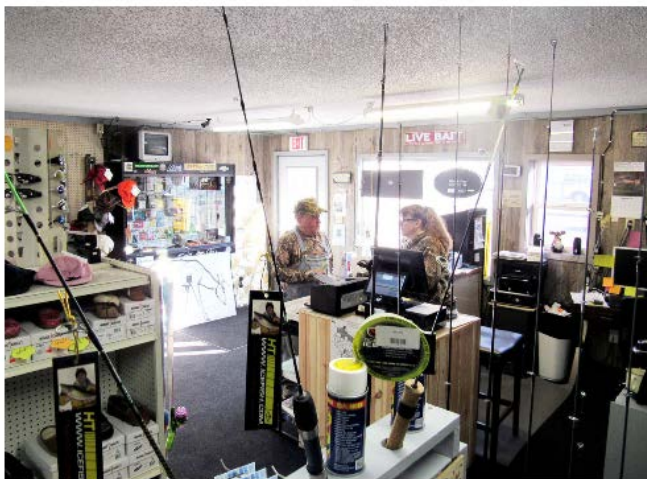
Don and Rachel Egelseer, who live on the Spread Eagle chain of lakes, have been instrumental in downtown redevelopment. Since 2000 the couple have purchased and renovated nearly a dozen buildings in Florence, including the Encore on Central Nostalgic Ballroom constructed in 1937 and now open for weddings and other events, including the fireman’s ball in February.

The couple have spent millions of dollars on the projects after selling their salvage business in 1998 in the Dodge County community of Hustisford. They own the Webb Judge House, a restored Queen Anne Victorian home built in 1883, a bakery, an antiques shop and a former medical building that was converted to senior housing. From 2002 to 2006, they did a complete restoration of an 1899 home on the downtown’s east side constructed by lumber baron David Fulmer on the north shore of Fisher Lake. The Egelseers built a new foundation and gutted the building for what is now home to Maxsells Restaurant & Suites.



Since 2000, Don and Rachel Egelseer have purchased and restored nearly a dozen buildings in the town of Florence. One of their largest projects was the renovation of the Encore on Central Nostalgic Ballroom, constructed in 1937. The center now hosts weddings, parties and other events. [Buy Now](#)

“It was ready to fall down the hill,” said Rachel Egelseer, 69, a Cedarburg native. “We moved up to our lake home and we proceeded to clean up our little town. Our downtown was deplorable. It was very, very run down. It had just gone down hill since the end of mining but I think we’re on the brink of something happening here.”



Ice-fishing gear is stocked and ready for the upcoming season at Whisler Outdoors in downtown Florence. Fay Whisler, right, who is helping a customer buy a deer license, purchased the shop in April with her husband and three sons. [Buy Now](#)

Fay and Doug Whisler and their three sons are among those with confidence. They purchased Florence Sport & Bait in April. The shop sells archery equipment, fishing gear, ammunition and hunting licenses. They’re hoping to have guns in their shop by the end of the year.

“We had a good summer,” Fay Whisler said between customers buying deer licenses. “It’s been pretty steady. We just wanted to have something for the future and for our grandchildren.”

Dan and Diane Doll grew up in Monona, have been married for 42 years and have lived in Florence for over 25 years. This fall the high school sweethearts, who had four children go through Florence schools, purchased the 11-room Lakeside Bed & Breakfast next door to Maxsells.

“We’ve been only here a month but we’ve been taking a lot of reservations,” Diane Doll said.

Another addition will come in January when a telepharmacy opens in the medical clinic which will reduce drives to drugstores in Iron Mountain, Michigan, for prescriptions. The program will allow patients and a pharmacy technician at the clinic to communicate via video with a pharmacist in Crivitz, said Wendy Gehlhoff, who took over the Florence County Economic Development organization in 2005. Over the last 11 years she has helped promote the community, pushed for the creation of a 628-acre tax incremental financing district and is hoping to lure not only more businesses to the downtown and industrial park but young families to the county.

“With the new jobs and all this investment, it’s really exciting,” said Gehlhoff, whose husband, Jim Gehlhoff, is on the School Board. “I’m a very persistent person who pushes and who gathers people together. Ever since the first day I took this job I feel like there’s so much potential here. I’m just not giving up.”

A forest-based economy

Much of the economy here comes from forestland, and those numbers are growing. In 2012, according to the state Department of Natural Resources, the forest industry accounted for 131 jobs in the county, \$5.1 million in payroll and an economic value of \$24.2 million. In 2014, there were 262 forest-related jobs with \$7.5 million in payroll and an economic value of \$44.8 million.

Pride Manufacturing, a subsidiary of Medalist and established in Florence in 1989, employs 75 people and at one time made golf tees here. The tees are now manufactured in Maine but the printing on tees, golf pencils and ball marks in addition to Lincoln Logs are done at the Pride facility in the industrial park.

Florence Hardwoods turns logs into boards that are shipped to floor manufacturers around the country where they are turned into home flooring and even basketball courts. In 2010, Florence Hardwoods had 20 employees but has grown to 76 employees. A 120,000-square-foot, \$864,600 truck maintenance facility was added in 2015 and a storage facility is planned for 2017. The business, located on 120 acres, includes five kilns that can each dry 35,000 board feet at a time. Two more, that can each dry 75,000 board feet, are under construction at a cost of more than \$500,000.



Florence Hardwoods has five kilns that can each dry 35,000 board feet of lumber at a time but is adding two more kilns that can each dry 75,000 board feet at a time. The company saws logs into planks that are sold to flooring manufacturers. Some of the wood can be found in college and professional basketball courts. [Buy Now](#)

Steve Rochon, a foreman at the mill, who oversees production and even the sharpening of saw blades, has been with the company since 1989 and planned to be in deer camp 10 miles west of town this weekend. The Florence High School graduate voted for the school referendum and had two children graduate from the district. “I think the community has come a long ways,” Rochon said. “The town is starting to look a lot better now.”



A \$2.75 million street and sewer project in the town of Florence this year is one of the largest public projects in recent memory and touched 27 blocks of the community. The work included new sidewalks, replacing antiquated water and sewer mains and adding new street lights. [Buy Now](#)

“We’re trying to add value and we’re trying to keep our rip and planing building going,” said Ray Mills, 33, who manages the mill. “With the five kilns we can only run two or three days a week because we don’t have enough dry capacity. It’s a big investment.”

Maple can take 12 to 14 days to dry, while red oak can take up to 30 days, Mills said. He’s hopeful his workforce will approach 100 employees in the next five years.



Steve Rochon, a foreman at Florence hardwoods, walks past stacks of lumber that will be used for hardwood floors. The company can saw 165 cords of logs into planks in a single shift. [Buy Now](#)

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