

June 16-18, 2025
Wisconsin Rapids, WI

**WISCONSIN'S 2ND
CONNECTING
ENTREPRENEURIAL
COMMUNITIES
CONFERENCE**



Community Economic Development
DIVISION OF EXTENSION
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Repurposing the Papermill

CEC CONFERENCE

JUNE 17TH, 2025





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City History

- Two cities (east & west) formed to become one in 1900 (Wisconsin Rapids – 1920).
- Logging was the dominant industry in the late 1800's before papermaking.
- 1904 Consolidated Water Power Company began followed by the first papermill.



Papermaking

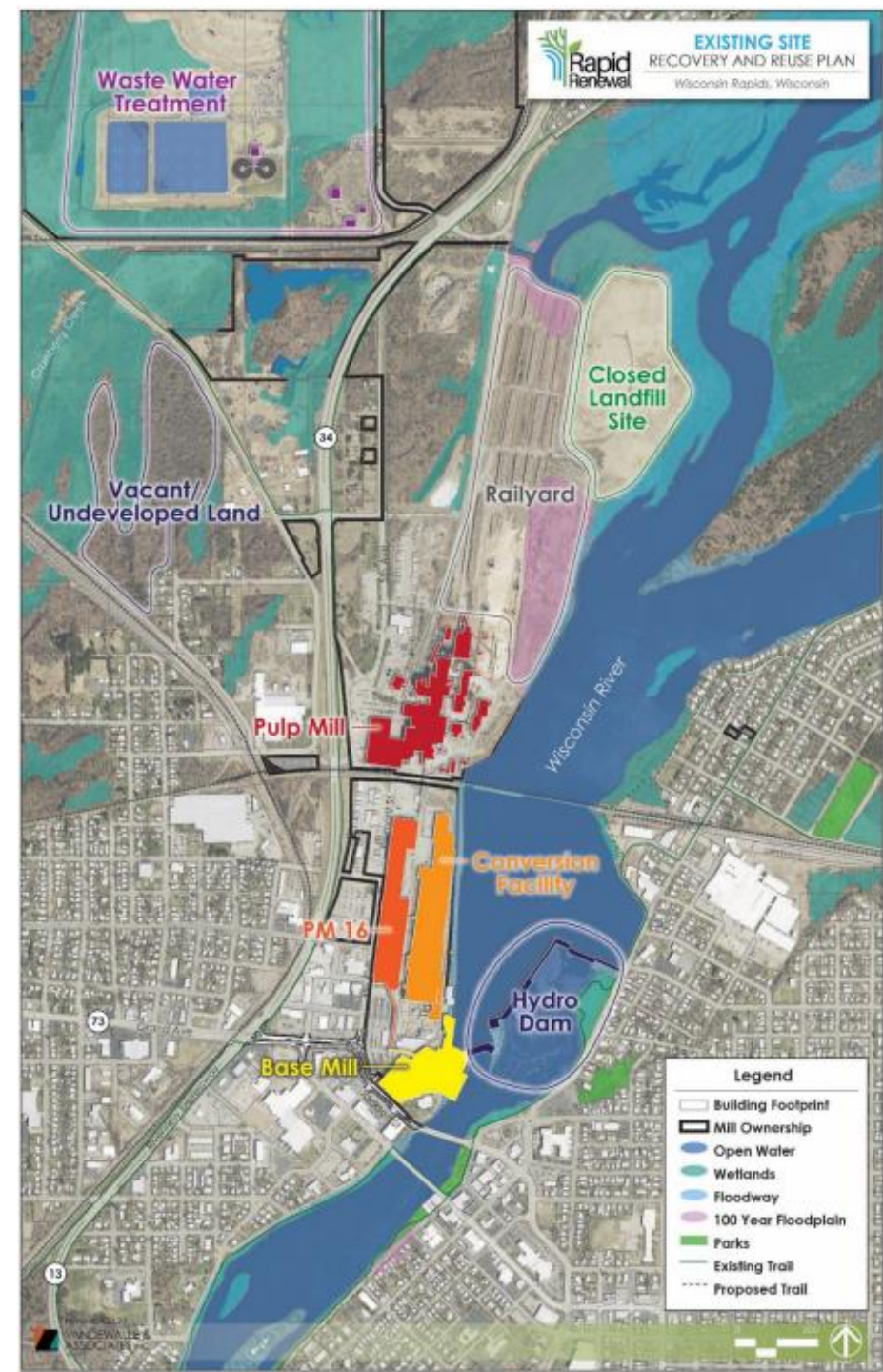
- Over the next 100 years, papermaking was the City's main industry and grew to over hundreds of acres and well over 1,000 employees
- The Mead Family of Consolidated papers owned and operated the Papermill for nearly 100 years, before selling in 2000.
- Ownership changed a few times thereafter before idling in 2020.
- The Legacy lives on in the community through the Mead Foundation, which invests heavily in the community.

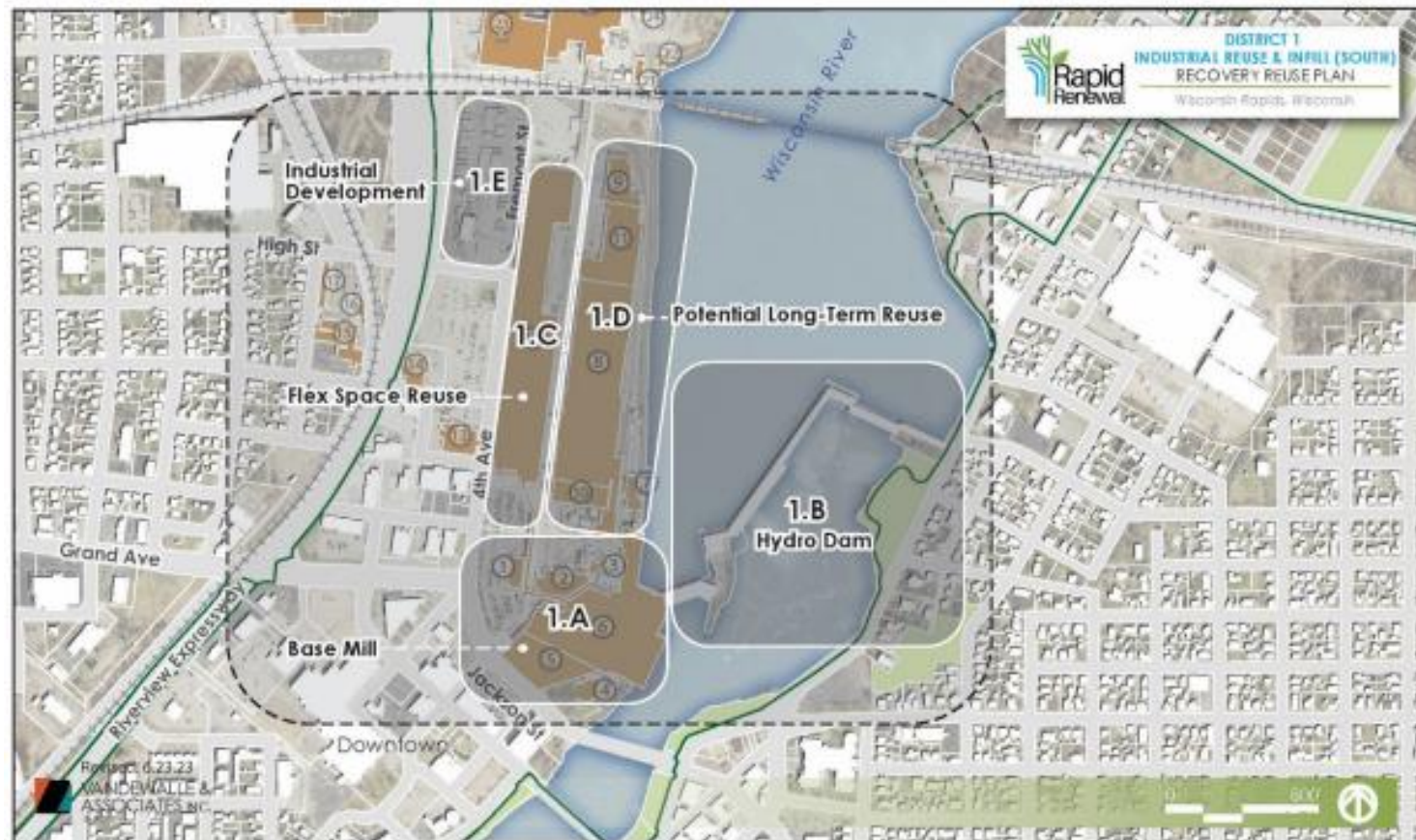
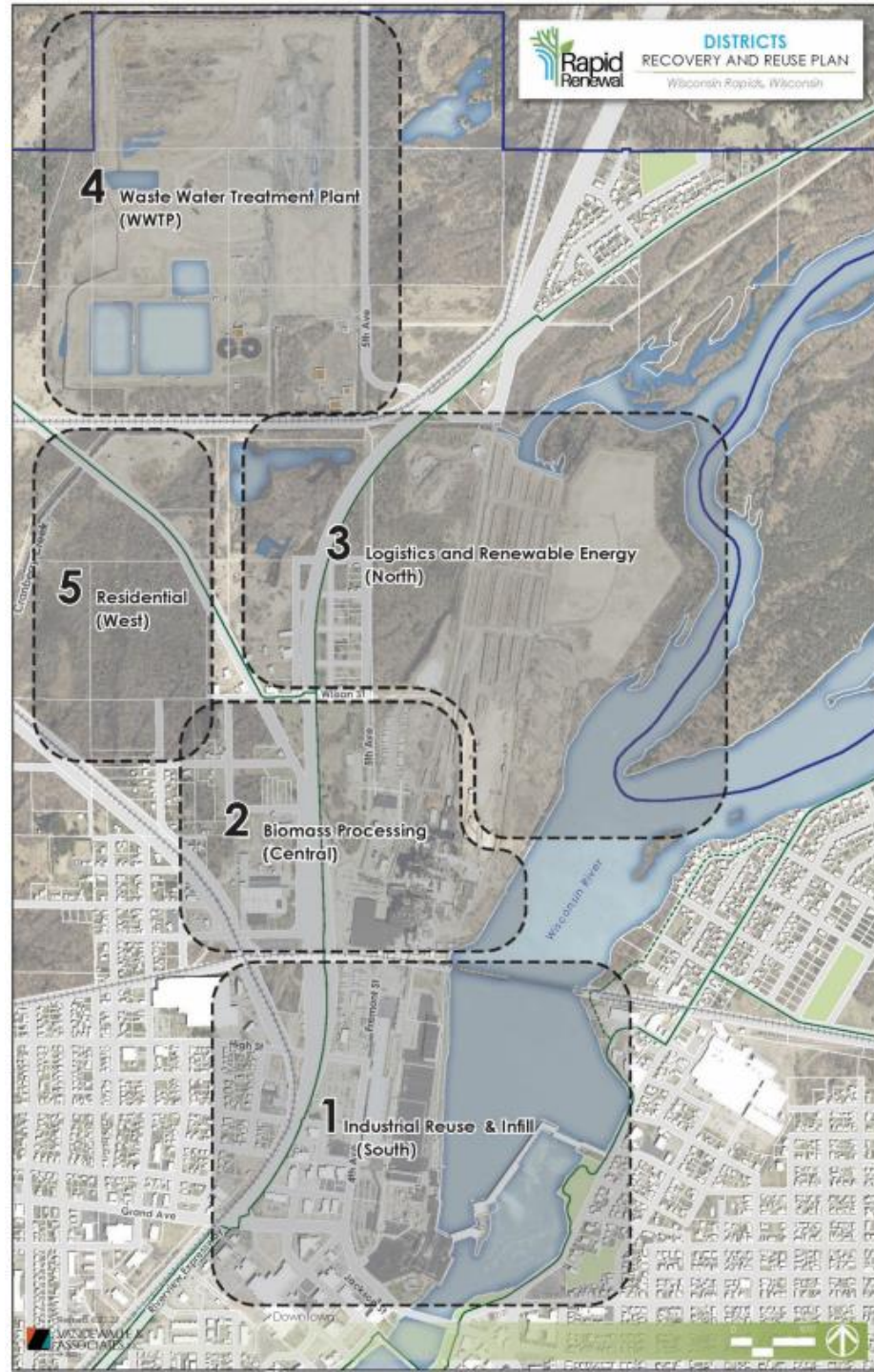


Redevelopment Plan

1. In 2020 the City obtained a national Economic Development Association (EDA) grant to conduct a recovery and redevelopment plan.
2. The Plan was completed in 2020.
3. The Plan called for reuse of much of the site.







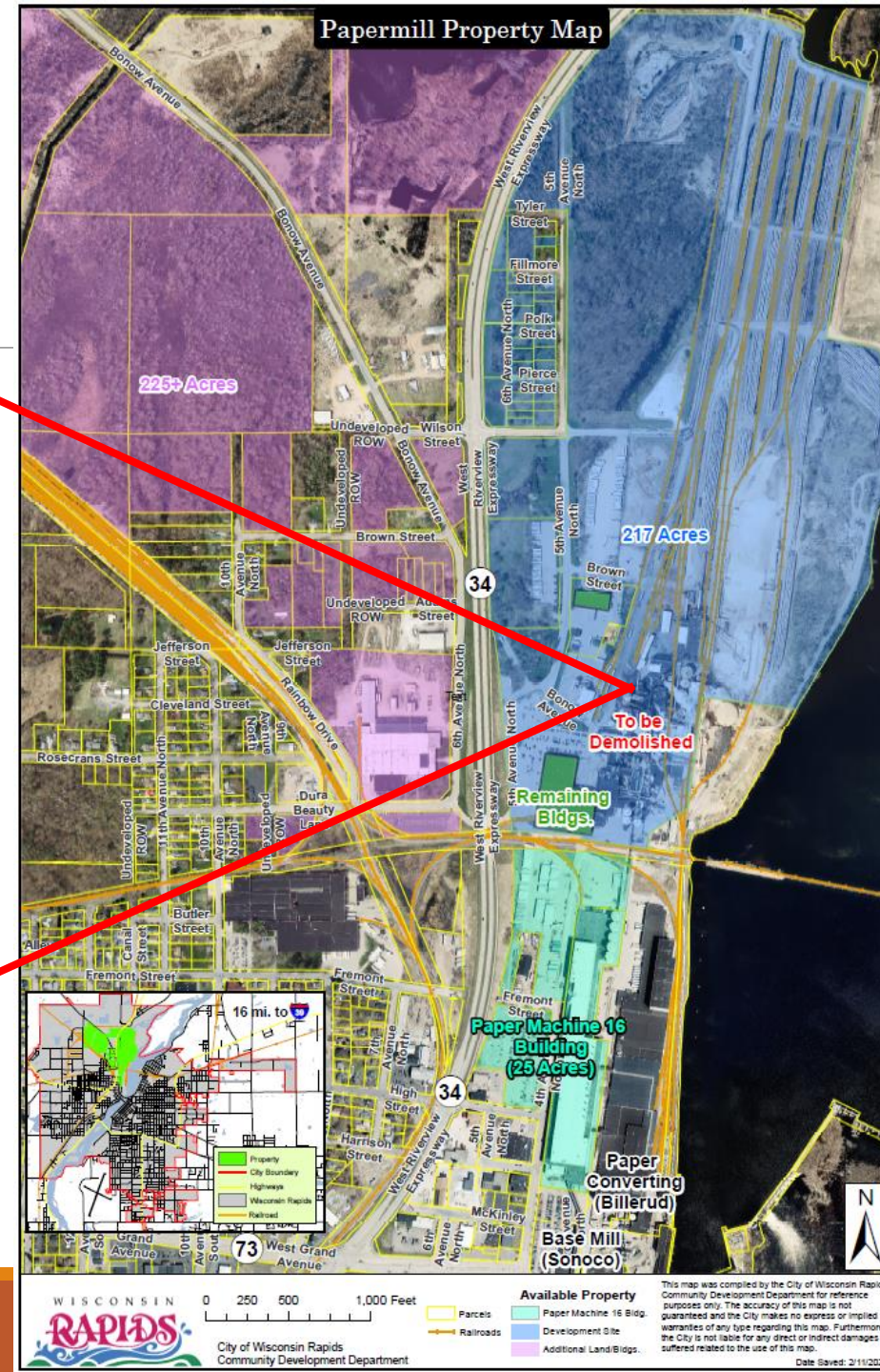
Continued Business & Growth



SONOCO



Demolition



Local Investment

Kellner
Process
& Fab



**FULLER
MECHANICAL**



Future Planning & Preparation

1. Assist in marketing and promoting the Papermill as a development opportunity.
2. Prepare to offer assistance in the form of a Tax Increment Finance District.
3. Completion of the downtown master plan in June 2025 – design space and streetscape for the highest and best use.
4. Downtown Housing Study – supports retail and restaurant



THANK
YOU





Repurposing the Paper Mill: Redirecting Rural Economies After Economic Shock

Connecting Entrepreneur Communities

June 17, 2025

MISSION

WEDC's mission is to strategically invest in Wisconsin to enhance the economic well-being of people and their businesses and communities.

VISION

WEDC's vision is an Economy for All, where every Wisconsinite has the opportunity to thrive.

***CREATING AN
ECONOMY FOR ALL,
WHERE EVERY WISCONSINITE HAS
THE OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE***



Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation



Business and Community Development



Office of Rural Prosperity



Entrepreneurship and Innovation



Global Trade & Investment



Productivity and Sustainability

Supporting Real Estate Development

Financial Assistance

Site Assessment/Brownfields Grant Programs

Community Development
Investment Grant Program

Idle Sites Redevelopment Grant Program

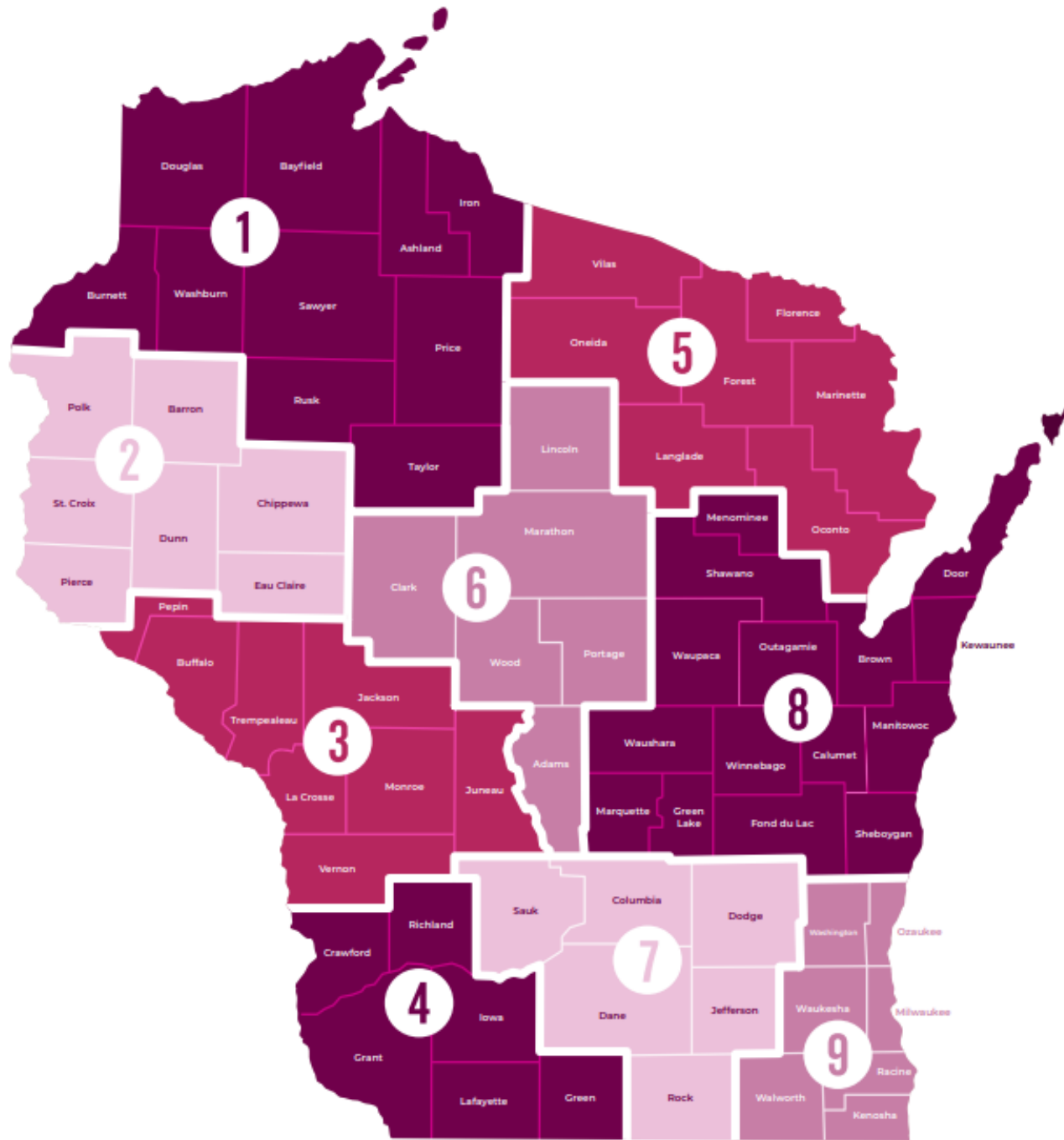
Historic Preservation Tax Credits Program

Technical Assistance

Locate in Wisconsin

Certified Sites Program





Regional Economic Development Directors

To see what makes Wisconsin a great state to live, work and play, visit **lookforwardwisconsin.com**

To see how WEDC can assist businesses and communities grow and site selectors in meeting their clients' needs, visit **wedc.org**

For general information on programs and available resources, visit **wedc.org/programs**

Find your Regional Economic Development Director at **wedc.org/contact-us/staff-directory#regional-economic-development-directors**

Websites: **lookforwardwisconsin.com** and **wedc.org**
Newsletters: **wedc.org/newsletter-sign-up**







Tri-City Refrigeration was born in 1945 to Frank Malek.

Tri-City Refrigeration was purchased by Denis & Carole Virnig in 1974.

Re-branded to Tri-City Services in 2019

Andrea Jensen is the current owner & operates the business with
husband Andy Jensen!



Andrea & Andy
Married 25 years this year!

Family
of 3 boys!




Lucas (12)
Kasey (16)
Jake (19)

What do we do?

- Heating
- Air Conditioning
- Commercial Refrigeration
- New in 2025... Plumbing!

Residential & Commercial Services

- Heating
 - Air Conditioning
 - Water heaters
 - Plumbing
 - Commercial Refrigeration
- 

Who Are We?

- ▶ 28 Andy (Vice-President)
 - ▶ 16 Karl (tech)
 - ▶ 18 Kevin (tech)
 - ▶ 36 Scott (tech)
 - ▶ 42 Mark (installer)
 - ▶ 7 Michael (tech/installer)
 - ▶ 7 Jake (technician)
 - ▶ 2 Ian & Don (installers)
 - ▶ 40 Ed LaBarre (Master Plumber & Service Manager)
- 26 Troy (Journeyman Plumber)
 - 5 Garrett (Installer)
 - 2 Jake (Installer)
 - 1 Marshall (Installer/tech)

Total Field Experience = 230 years!

Who Are We?

26 Andrea (President)

12 Sarah (Office Manager/my right hand)

10 Kelly (Dispatch)

2 Kylie (CSR)

8 Jacob (Sales)

21 Jim (warehouse)

25 Julie (office)

Total office experience at Tri-City = 104 years

In the beginning...

Started in 1945 as Commercial Refrigeration only while Frank Malek owned the business.

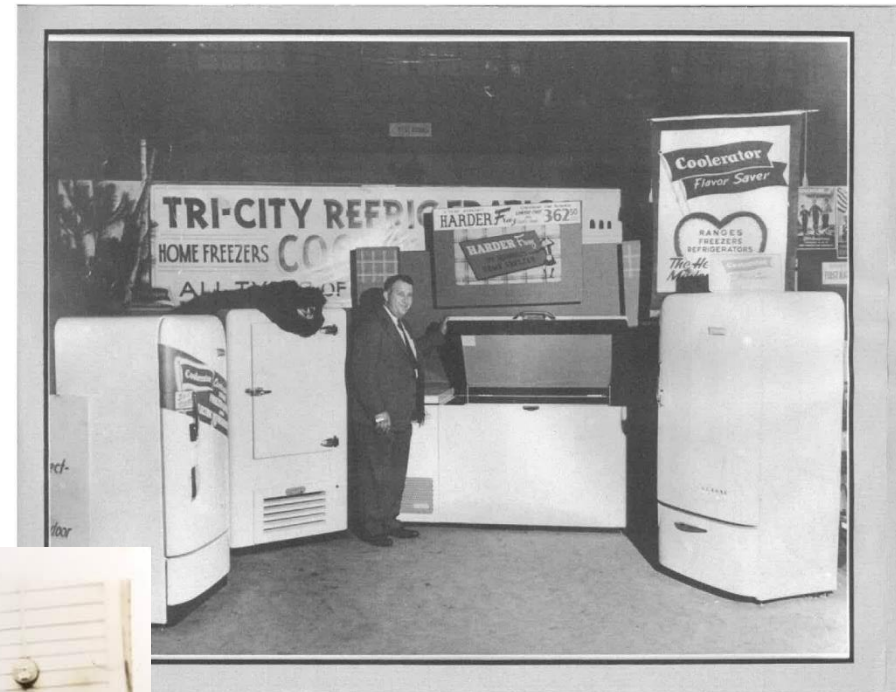
Originally named for the Tri-City area of Port Edwards, Nekoosa and Wis. Rapids.

Once Frank was ready to retire, Denis & Carole Virnig purchased it from Frank in 1974 and operated it out of their home until 1982, when they bought the building across the street.



History!

Frank Malek at a Home Show in Wis. Rapids. His daughter Karen said he was more proud of the bear he shot (laying on one of the refrigerators) than any of the refrigerators in the booth! Photo taken between 1945-1954



Pictured from L to R: Frank's daughter Karen Blaser (we think!), Frank Malek and perhaps a brother or employee of Frank's.
Photo provided by a family friend of the Malek's, guessing 1950-ish

Virnig History

Denis started working at another local HVAC company in 1969 or 1970. He worked there until Tri-City Refrigeration came up for sale and in 1974, he and Carole bought it. At the time they had one son, a daughter joined the family in late 1974 and Andrea in 1976!

Scott is a service technician at Tri-City and has been since 1990.

Andrea graduated from UW-SP in Dec 1999 and began working full time in the business since Carole said she was retiring!

Andy and Andrea started dating in 1996 and Andy decided he wanted to do HVAC. He went to Milwaukee Area Technical College for their spring semester HVAC Course and started working in May 1997. From 9/2008-2/2021, Andy worked for another large, regional HVAC Contractor. He re-joined Tri-City 3/2021.

Celebrating 50 years in 1995!



STEVE DAVIS/Daily Tribune
Denis and Carole Virnig, owners of Tri-City Refrigeration Inc., 3019 Highway 13 N., for the past 21 years, will celebrate the firm's 50th anniversary with an open house from 3 to 9 p.m. Sept. 27.

In loving Memory and in honor of Denis & Carole Virnig, we celebrate 80 years in business in 2025!

Their legacy lives on in all of us.

We love you and miss you both!

Denis 1943-2009
Carole 1944-2024



In 1982, Denis & Carole bought the building at 3019 Hwy 73, which was conveniently located across the highway from their home. This building was a former HVAC company, came with sheet metal equipment and allowed for growth & expansion into the HVAC industry.


HVAC became more and more of the business as I took a more active role in marketing (Oldest Furnace/AC/Water Heater Contests). Paper mill work fell off and was replaced by residential and more light commercial work.

Nov 2009: Denis unexpectedly passed away, and I became President and General Manager.

Sept 2019: I became sole owner.

The company was holding its own but not operating at its full potential. Sales were consistent, but we weren't consistently growing. By being so small, it was hard to grow while still working in the business day in and day out.

I decided to ask, ok persuade my husband Andy, to come work with me and do this right. And now we're building the dream together.



March 2021 Andy re-joined the company and sales grew by 28%.

2022: Sales grew by 33%. Employee count started increasing!


2023: Sales grew by 19%. Added more employees.

2024: Based on the previous three years of growth, we decided we needed to look for a bigger building.

We outgrew the office space of less than 1000 sq ft. and about 5800 sq ft of shop space. **We needed to hire a Manager** but had no office space! The parking lot was full – no more parking spots for more employees. We were bursting at the seams.

The search began in summer 2024. We researched existing properties on our own first to see what we thought we could afford and then connected with our realtor to start seriously looking.

We checked out the cost of building and then the perfect building came on the market, so we jumped on it.



Building Search & research...


We reached out to and worked with the **Small Business Development Center (SBDC)** at UWSP. The staff helped direct us to different funding opportunities to help with down payment, possible grants, etc. Assisted with budgeting to plan for growth and a new building.

We also worked with **Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC)** for potential grants to help buy the building. We applied for the IDLE Grant, but the property didn't meet the guidelines due to the size of the property. Had we gotten the IDLE Grant, we could've done additional work & improvements to the property.

We worked with **Central WI Economic Development (CWED)** that helped provide gap funding for the eventual purchase.

We put in an offer to purchase 321 4th Ave N. in early September and it was accepted!

2024 ended with another increase in sales of 10% and we bought the new building on 12/16/24!




Purchase process:

1. **Inspections.** Our inspector noted several deficiencies in the building, the roof in particular. Through amendments, we negotiated the price to account for some of the deficiencies.

2. **Financing.** Due to some of the deficiencies, most lenders would not finance the transaction. That's when our realtor, Nate Weidman, recommended talking to Andy Vidal at Key Savings Bank. We made a phone call, and they went above and beyond! They financed our building as well as providing financing for the needed repairs. And have recently financed two new vans for our plumbing department. We own the building personally in an LLC that we own and lease it back to the business.

Through this entire process, we learned of other grants through **WEDC** and applied for a **Fast Forward Training Grant**, which we were awarded to help train new employees in HVAC as well as plumbers as we grow our new Plumbing department.




2025 is the year of growth!

**We've MOVED and added
Plumbing Services!**



321 4th Avenue North, Wis. Rapids

2025 – Planning for HUGE Growth this year

1. Getting settled into the new building.
 2. Celebrating **80 years in business** (Open House July 25th!)
 3. Added a **Plumbing Division**
Welcome Ed LaBarre, Master Plumber & Service Manager as well as Troy, a Journeyman Plumber!
 4. Planning for 25% Growth with HVAC and the Plumbing expansion
From 2020 – 2024 we nearly doubled our revenue.
 5. Utilizing the **Fast Forward Grant** for training new employees
Recently hired 4 employees, still looking to add another Journeyman Plumber as that department has grown quickly.
- 

Lessons learned & still learning:

Growth is painful and beautiful all in one.

Picking a leadership team that's on the same page with the same goal.

Knowing when you just can't do it all yourself and that it's ok to let go of that task and hire the right person.

Hiring people that fit your organization's culture is important.
Teamwork really does make the dream work.

Communicating with employees is vitally important.
We implemented 1:1's with our staff because as we grow, we didn't want to lose connection.

Sharing goals and vision so everyone knows where we're going.

Adding additional services and diversifying your offering to your customers fuels growth also.



Lessons learned and still learning:

Have a Professional Team at the ready.

They know you and your business: an attorney, an accountant, realtor, business coach, and a banker that is local and that you can trust.

Know who to contact for more assistance. Don't be afraid to ASK!

- HOW Chamber of Commerce is a great connection for business growth.
- UWSP's SBDC, WEDC, CWED... all great resources that are instrumental in helping us get to where we are today.

Be proactive and intentional instead of reactive.

We spent too much time being reactive and once we became proactive and refocused, everything improves. Prioritization and delegation is key.

It's all a balancing act!
QUESTIONS?