



The New North: Integrating Newcomers and Communities In Northern Wisconsin for Civic Health and Sustainable Rural Futures

Summary Report

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**Center for Community
and Nonprofit Studies**
SCHOOL OF HUMAN ECOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
ASHLAND COUNTY

Project Background and Goals

This project, supported through a University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension Innovation Grant, and advanced by partners at Extension Ashland County and the Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies (the CommNS), built upon previous work done in 2023 by Extension and Northland College about residential shifts in the county. This work looked at the migration of new residents from other regions to the area, including why they came to Ashland County and their experiences as newcomers. This new project sought to:

- Gather updated information from new residents in Ashland County
- Gain understanding of how new residents are engaging in community, and related gaps and opportunities for community engagement
- Learn about the challenges facing communities in Ashland County, and how civic engagement, community connections, and local assets can support the region
- Explore the role of "third places" in bringing local people together and opportunities for fortifying existing community organizations and groups
- Bring residents together to develop ideas for bolstering civic engagement and strengthening community assets
- Identify actionable steps and community members and organizations to advance them

At the beginning of this project, it was announced that Northland College, an anchor institution of higher education in Ashland County, and the institutional home of two of the original project partners on this project, would permanently close due to ongoing fiscal challenges. With increased contributions of



Extension Ashland County and the CommNS, we were able to honor the spirit and aims of the project, but we had to reduce some of our planned recruitment and outreach activities due to lack of Northland faculty and student support.

We recognize, however, the closure of Northland College, a “[cornerstone of the Ashland community for over 133 years](#)”, to present a critical new issue and consequential development to any discussion of migration and residence in Ashland County. Northland was a magnet for many new residents to the county, including students as temporary residents, those who stay more permanently after graduation, and faculty and staff who relocate to the area for employment. Northland also served as an anchor institution for the local social landscape, offering events and activities for social connection and as a key employer (of approximately 150 faculty and staff).



WHAT WE DID

In Summer 2025, we sent an [online survey](#) to individuals who had moved to Ashland County since 2020. Through publicly available property records, we identified 794 individuals who had purchased property in Ashland County since 2020 and sent a survey link through mailed postcards with a QR code. We also shared the survey link on social media, in flyers at community sites, by email outreach through Extension Ashland County lists, and by email to rental property owners. Questions in the survey asked newcomers how they engage with the local community and local government, whether they were satisfied with their levels of engagement, among other topics.



In September 2025, we conducted **focus groups** in the city of Ashland and Glidden, with representatives from area businesses and organizations. Participants represented health care organizations, business development organizations, local retail and wellness businesses, and others who interact with the public in ways that contribute to civic engagement or community connection. In the focus groups, we asked about observations related to newcomers, how residents engage with the community, key issues and challenges they saw facing the area, and recommendations for strengthening community connections.

In September, we also hosted a **community event** in Mellen in which we shared our initial findings from the survey and focus groups and asked residents for their reflections and feedback. The 23 attendees at the event included leaders in the school district and library system, new residents from other parts of Wisconsin and the country, individuals who are originally from the region but recently returned, long-time locals holding key roles in health care and local businesses, new business owners, and elected officials and civil servants.



WHAT WE LEARNED

Survey Findings

Seventy-four new residents to Ashland County since 2020 responded to the survey. They reported:

- Relatively **high levels of civic engagement** compared to Wisconsin state averages¹, specifically high levels of reading, watching or listening to news or information about political, societal, or local issues (93%); having a conversation or spending time with their neighbors (90%); doing favors for their neighbors, such as housesitting, watching each other's children, lending tools, and other things to help (78%); discussing political, societal, or local issues with their neighbors (64%), and spending time volunteering for an organization or association (58%).
- **High rates of voter registration** for elections in Ashland County (88%).
- **Interest in getting more engaged in the community**, as nearly half (47%) said their engagement with the community is “too little.”
- **Barriers to engagement** in the community that they experienced, including not having enough time (47%), not seeing opportunities that interested them (47%), and not knowing how to get involved (35%).



1. To compare with Wisconsin state averages, we reviewed the AmeriCorps Civic Engagement and Volunteering Dashboard, with data from 2017 through 2023. This data is publicly available on the AmeriCorps website:

<https://data.americorps.gov/stories/s/AmeriCorps-Civic-Engagement-and-Volunteering-CEV-D/62w6-z7xa/>.

Findings from Focus Groups and Community Event

Participants in the two focus groups (15 individuals) and the community event (23 individuals) shared insights on several topics. Regarding **how residents engage** with the community, participants described:

- **A broad range of organizations that supported civic engagement**, including small businesses, anchor employers and institutions, nonprofit and economic development organizations, and faith-based groups. This includes established civil society organizations like chambers of commerce, community development organizations, veterans' associations, public libraries, and Extension Ashland County, but also retail businesses, large employers, and parent groups.
- **Creative efforts** by these organizations to build community and support engagement, such as community events hosted by retailers or an informal community sauna.
- **Shifts over time and challenges to civic engagement** seen nationally but also experienced locally, including paused activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and declining membership in faith-based organizations.
- The continued value of **volunteering for civic engagement**, as these opportunities support engagement with local organizations, provide essential support to community members, and help residents meet others and build community.



"If you want to be community minded, in small towns like this, don't be afraid to volunteer for the fairs or [other events]. Get involved. I say, make yourself available. Because a lot of these small towns have older people that are not able to do some of the things they're looking for volunteers or people to give an opinion or be involved, even as a business."

– Ashland County resident and third space representative

- **Various ways in which community information is shared**, about local news, events, and opportunities. Preferred media varies by community. For example, in the City of Ashland, Facebook is widely used for local information, but residents of smaller communities turned to their weekly local newspapers (e.g., Mellen Weekly Record and Glidden Enterprise). Word-of-mouth continues to be a useful way to gain local information across all communities.

"The other main one is old fashioned word of mouth. If you are involving yourself with the community, you will inevitably spark a network – a very close, tight network that gets word out really fast. We also still have a newspaper here which businesses put ads in and people do read it and look at it."

– Glidden resident and third space representative



Participants also identified **challenges** related to new residents and civic engagement in Ashland County. These included:

- **Access to housing** for both newcomers and longstanding residents, particularly in the City of Ashland. Participants described a lack of housing in the city for an increasing population as well as higher housing costs.
- **Need for economic development** across the county. Participants saw a need for job development that could encourage residents to stay and attract newcomers, especially from industries that would maintain the nature and identity of the area. In small towns, participants wanted to see economic development tailored to the assets and needs of these areas. Participants also noted the need to support outfitters, hospitality businesses, and others in the tourism industry as they navigate changes in weather patterns and climate.



- **Need to ensure liveable communities** with opportunities for engagement, education, recreation, and community connection to maintain the area as a desirable place to live. Liveable communities impact economic development, as employers may be more likely to locate in places that their employees want to live.
- **Lack of services for residents across the lifespan**, including childcare and older adult programs. Participants believed that shortages, lack of affordability, and geographic inaccessibility could make Ashland County an undesirable place to move or stay.
- **Polarization among local residents** which can pose challenges to civic engagement or create barriers to feeling at home in the area.
- **The shuttering of Northland College** as a significant event for the region, impacting employment, community events and civic life, local identity, and more.

"I just had a passion for economic development...but the reason I do is I see a threat, a vulnerability maybe, with Northland closing, that makes me really nervous to support the longevity of our community. And I think now is the time to really start thinking, okay, this happened, what are we going to do about it?"

- Ashland County resident and third space representative

- **Declining enrollment in K-12 schools**, particularly in smaller towns, which can lead to questions about district mergers, expanded geographic boundaries, and shifts in community identity. These trends affect current residents and potential residents who are considering the area.
- **Responding to demographic and generational shifts** as they influence civic engagement. This includes declining engagement in churches, vacancies in traditional volunteer roles (like volunteer firefighters), but also desires among young professionals to find new ways to connect. Participants noted variability in residents' interests in committing to recurring volunteer roles or engaging in one-time opportunities. Parents pointed to the demands of raising children as barriers to taking on formal volunteer roles.
- **Navigating community information** from a decentralized collection of local sources. Newer residents expressed desires for region-wide information that could be viewed and explored in a more comprehensive manner.



Lastly, participants in the focus groups and community events spoke of the **opportunities and interests** they saw for supporting civic engagement and community connection, including:

- **Creating a centralized information hub**, such as a calendar of events, that would be easily accessible to residents throughout the county. Participants noted a recent effort and newly launched radio station, 97.7 WVCB-Voice of Chequamegon Bay, to offer a calendar of local events on its website, <https://wvcb.org/events/>.
- **Greater collaboration across sectors and communities in the county**, including third-space representatives, local businesses, and public institutions.

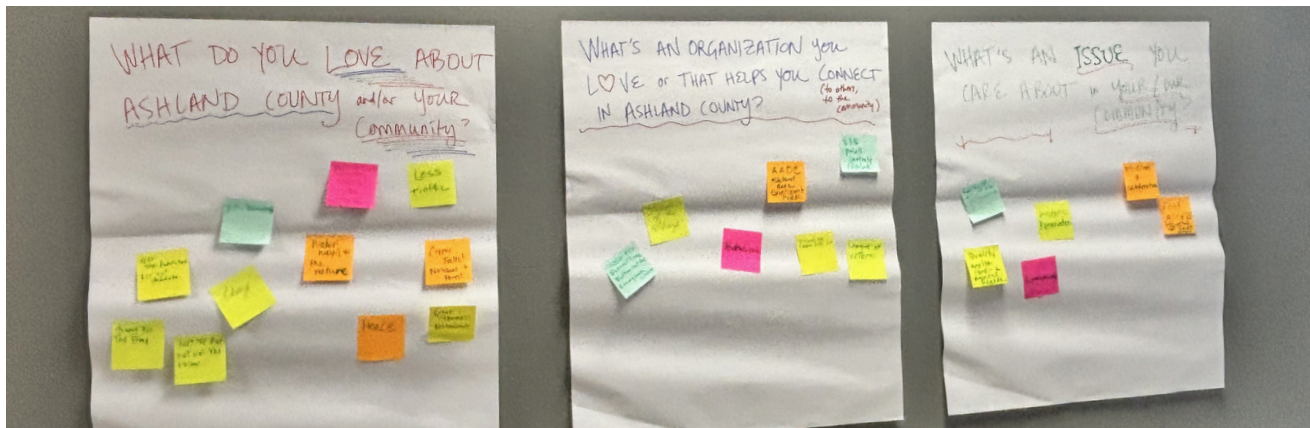
- **More community engagement around planning the future of the region.** New and long-time residents expressed an appetite for participation and they believe engagement will lead to well-informed plans and greater leveraging of resources from across sectors. Participants pointed to planning for the future of the Northland College site as a prime and urgent example for such engagement.
- **Support organizing around civic engagement** in the area, especially efforts that are locally-initiated and focused.

"I think coming together as community, as an area, versus it being so siloed, and having those safe spaces, because even noticing between the tribes and Ashland, there's a clear break right there...So I think that whole piece is very big, and coming together and welcoming people and also working together as as neighbors and all that good stuff."

- Ashland County resident and third space representative

WHAT THIS MEANS

Both new residents and local representatives are interested in strengthening civic engagement in Ashland County. Participants suggested **facilitating information-sharing through centralized channels** and **generating new opportunities for community engagement through collaborations** across sectors and communities. In addition, participants highlighted the need for **economic development** to accompany these efforts, including sufficient jobs, housing, and services for people across the lifespan throughout the county. There remain untapped opportunities to **invite and engage community members' perspectives and expertise in collective planning** for the future of the region. By considering residents' interests and concerns, there are many possibilities that will support the symbiotic civic and economic flourishing of the area.



PROPOSED NEXT STEPS

With these results in mind, we suggest consideration of the following next steps:

- **Engage anchor institutions**, including municipal government, chambers of commerce, health care organizations, Extension Ashland County, and others to initiate and organize strategies.
- **Recognize and engage the array of informal and cross-sector organizations** that can work as key partners in these efforts, including outdoors clubs, restaurants and taverns, faith-based organizations, parent groups, biking groups, and more. Consider broadly the scope of organizations that serve as community connectors.
- In convening partners in efforts to enhance civic engagement, **consider an agenda** to address topics of: identification of community-connecting organizations; local information-sharing and/or a shared calendar of events; volunteer recruitment, especially for critical roles; future planning for the Northland College site; community engagement in municipal government and future planning; and supporting the liveability of the region, including vibrant cultural activities and local identity.