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## Downtown events, new businesses on 2022's schedule

**Daphne Lemke**

Fond du Lac Reporter

USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

FOND DU LAC - From new businesses to quality of living improvements, Fond du Lac has a lot to be optimistic about in 2022.

Envision Greater Fond du Lac and Downtown Fond du Lac Partnership led area businesses through a second year of the COVID-19 pandemic with resources to help new businesses open and existing businesses stay afloat.

For the public, they offered engagement and education opportunities throughout 2021, bringing back favorite programs and events, and introducing new ones.

Both organizations shared with The Reporter what's in store for 2022, from workforce attraction and retention efforts to new businesses and murals on Main Street.

Here's what Fond du Lac has to look forward to:

### Investing in the next generation

After a year of providing career education and new programs, Envision Greater Fond du Lac's goal for 2022 is to continue tackling the labor shortage across Fond du Lac County.

Among 27 attraction projects and 13 expansion projects in 2021, Envision launched the Fond du Lac County Worker Relocation Incentive Program, the first of its kind, which provides businesses with the ability to offer prospective hires an incentive of up to \$15,000 to work and live in Fond du Lac.

In addition, the Fond du Lac County Concierge Program provides a suite of services to employers to enhance their talent recruitment efforts, Tracy Qualmann, Envision's director of marketing and communication, told The Reporter.

Other efforts included:

- The results of a 2021 broadband survey of the county are being used to apply for grants and expand fiber optic cabling throughout the area.

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The Night Market will return every other Thursday night this summer.

USA TODAY NETWORK-WIS. FILE

## STUDENT LOANS



# Restart of payments looming

State and federal lawmakers have proposed a number of solutions to the growing student loan debt crisis, including forgiveness of debt up to \$10,000, through pandemic relief legislation. GETTY IMAGES

## Here's what Wisconsinites can do to prepare as the May 1 repayment deadline approaches

Natalie Brophy Appleton Post-Crescent | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

When former President Donald Trump's administration announced in March 2020 that student loan payments were suspended due to the economic impact of the coronavirus, Mike Mathison and his family took full advantage of the pause. • The 36-year-old Sun Prairie man had been paying around \$325 a month on his remaining \$50,000 in student loans. Until the federal repayment pause, student loan payment "took priority over most things," he said, like getting a new car or making upgrades to his family's home. • For the past two years, Mathison has not made any payments toward his loans. Instead, he and his wife decided to use that money to buy a new car, send their daughter to summer camp and build up their savings account.

"We've been putting (the money) in savings instead and just kind of playing a wait-and-see game," Mathison said. "With (President Joe) Biden getting elected, the hope was that some or all of it would be forgiven. And until that gets resolved or the payments start again, I just felt like that money could easily go to other places and things we need, but I don't want to spend it and then not have it later on when I have to start paying again, if that happens."

Mathison is among the 715,800 Wisconsinites who have student loan debt, according to University of Wisconsin-Madison's Student Success Through Applied Research Lab.

The average Wisconsin borrower has \$32,230 in student loan debt, for a total of \$23.1 billion combined, according to the SSTAR Lab. But compared to other states, student loan debt in Wisconsin is relatively low. The Badger State ranks 45th in average debt per borrower across all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia, according to the SSTAR Lab.

If you're like Mathison and haven't made any payment toward your student loans since 2020, here's

some things to keep in mind as the repayment deadline approaches.

### How to prepare for repayment

On March 20, 2020, the Federal Student Aid Office announced federal student loan payments would be suspended to help Americans who were impacted financially by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the life of the pause, eligible loans have not accrued interest and collections on defaulted loans were stopped.

President Joe Biden recently extended the pause to May 1, citing ongoing pandemic-related challenges faced by student loan borrowers. The suspension was previously scheduled to expire on Jan. 31.

Fox Valley-based certified financial planner Sarah Paulson suggests those who haven't been paying their loans take a look at their spending and make a plan for how they're going to manage their money once repayment starts.

See STUDENT LOANS, Page 5A

## COVID infections would be proof of immunity under bill

**Molly Beck**

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

MADISON - Republican lawmakers want Wisconsin employers to accept a past COVID-19 infection to meet vaccine and testing requirements aimed at protecting their workforces and to allow workers who don't comply with

such mandates to qualify for unemployment benefits if they are fired.

The legislation is being advanced as Wisconsin enters one of the most threatening points of the coronavirus pandemic, with record-setting infections and nearly 80% of hospital intensive care units at peak capacity.

Four states led by Republican governors changed eligibility rules for un-

employment benefits in recent weeks to include workers who did not comply with vaccine mandates.

And three states now require employers to accept a past COVID-19 infection as part of their vaccine and testing rules.

Gov. Tony Evers has signaled he would veto such legislation.

Wisconsin bill author Rep. Cody

Horlacher of Mukwonago and Sen. Mary Felzkowski of Irma are proposing to allow employers to accept documentation signed by a health care provider showing that the individual tested positive for COVID-19, or showing a serology test that demonstrates the presence of naturally occurring antibodies.

See IMMUNITY, Page 7A

### USA TODAY

**Omicron:** Experts say variant might be headed for rapid drop in U.S., Britain as it runs out of people to infect. **3A**

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# 2022

Continued from Page 1A

• The Summer Series for Interns and Co-ops introduced a record 103 interns and co-ops to the region, and Envision's new official Advocacy Committee outlines the organization's priorities and legislative agenda.

• To reach students with career possibilities close to home, Envision shared career resources with middle school teachers and presented Ag in the Classroom to nearly 4,000 elementary school students.

For this year, Envision will introduce programming and events aimed to address the barriers leading to the county's labor shortage, including housing, child care access and transportation to work, Qualmann said.

"We are committed to telling the story of Fond du Lac County and its good quality of life through building a positive identity and distinct sense of place," Qualmann said.

One such program will be geared toward graduating high school seniors: the Fond du Lac Retention, Opportunities, Community, Knowledge (ROCKS) program will further awareness of career opportunities in the county.

## Night market will make a return

Visitors to the downtown area may have noticed not only new businesses, but also new beautification efforts and events, according to Downtown Fond du Lac Partnership Executive Director Amy Hansen.

Scattered across various downtown locations are six mural installations, as well as the 162-foot-long mural "Mandala Flowers" by Erin LaBonte, David Carpenter and Don Krumpas, covering the entire north-facing wall of the historic brick building at 82 N. Main St.

The public enjoyed last year's programming, including 24 farmers markets, two wine walks, the St. Patrick's Day Pub Crawl, Chili Crawl, Monster March, Holiday Kickoff Weekend, Fondue Fest and the new Night Market.

Twenty new and expanded businesses settled into the downtown area in 2021:

- Argentum et Aurum Jewelry, 25 N. Main St.
- Being Christine Photography, 27 N.



A mural titled "Mandala Flowers" is among beautification efforts in downtown Fond du Lac. USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN FILE

## Main St.

- Bespoke Salon, 20 N. Main St.
- CC's Chocolates, 57 N. Macy St.
- Flanagan State Bank Mortgage Office, 17 Forest Ave., Suite 12
- Forte Investigations, LLC, 17 Forest Ave., Suite 12
- Fox Valley Insurance Group, 74 S. Main St., Suite 105
- Handmade Haven, 73 S. Main St.
- Penton Counseling, 17 Forest Ave., Suite 15
- Roxanne Elise Photography, 20 Forest Ave., Suite 101
- Sneaker Culture, 44 N. Main St.
- The Cellar District Restaurant, 40 E. Division St.
- The Dispensary, 113 N. Main St.
- The Great Escape Fond du Lac, 21 N. Portland St., Suite 1A
- The Hip Hop Shop, 231 S. Main St.
- Toppers Pizza, 186 N. Main St.
- Twisted Thread Quilting, 25A N. Main St.
- Kitty's Coaching, 17 Forest Ave., Suite 15A
- Gathered Roots, 15 N. Main St.
- Arbor Acres Tree Service, 45 N. Main St.

Of these businesses, 14 received \$10,000 from the Main Street Bounceback Grant, distributed by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corpora-

tion's regional partners with funds from the American Recovery Plan Act.

Roxanne Abler of Roxanne Elise Photography, 20 Forest Ave., was one of the recipients of the grant after she leased her first portrait studio space in early 2021, her tenth year in business.

The property management company introduced her to the grant, and the Downtown Fond du Lac Partnership helped with the application process.

"Expanding into a physical location came with significant expenses for remodeling, decorating, furnishing, purchasing signage, adding product samples, and purchasing studio lighting and backdrops," she said. "This grant allowed me to focus more on my typical yearly expenses without having to worry about the added costs."

Abler also said the grant has contributed to the downtown area becoming more vibrant – a place where small businesses can thrive – and she has enjoyed watching many of the buildings downtown being remodeled or restored this past year.

"There were several vacant spaces that now have businesses operating out of them, which gives a much nicer impression of the city as a whole," she said.

Gov. Tony Evers visited two of the

businesses, Twisted Thread Quilting and The Cellar District, in early October alongside Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes.

Building Improvement Grants, totaling \$125,000, also helped 11 area properties revitalize their business facades.

Top Shelf Bar & Grill and Downtown Deli To Go, 90 S. Main St., will be one of the grant's first 2022 recipients, Hansen said.

This year will also see additional murals, including at Fond du Lac Cycler, 209 S. Main St. and at the Portland Street parking ramp, as well as artistic painted fencing at Edith's Bridal, 9 S. Main St.

New businesses so far will include The Lighthouse Wine Bar & Bistro in the former Ziggy's Pub, 213 S. Main St., and the return of Atlas Gaming, 21 N. Main St. Both have anticipated spring openings.

After last summer's positive reception from the public, the Night Market will return every other Thursday night this summer in conjunction with the Thelma Sadoff Center for the Arts Thursday night concert series.

The other events from 2021 are also anticipated to return this year.

## Businesses in old Shopko to open

Hobby Lobby and Big Lots signed leases to share the former Shopko building, 616 W. Johnson St., after Corta Development and NETSTREIT Corp. split the building into space for two retailers.

Big Lots celebrated a soft opening Dec. 30 and is planning a grand opening Feb. 12, according to Taylor Castillejo, a PR Specialist for the Tombras advertising agency representing the company.

Big Lots, Inc. is retail company headquartered in Columbus, Ohio with over 1,400 stores in 47 states. The store offers a free rewards program, VIP shopping days and big buyout alerts, and sells everything from name brand furniture to home goods, clothing, groceries, electronics and pet supplies.

No representatives for Hobby Lobby were available for comment on the progress or anticipated opening date of its store.

Contact Daphne Lemke at [dlemke@gannett.com](mailto:dlemke@gannett.com). Follow her on Twitter at [@daphlemke](https://twitter.com/daphlemke).

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