



COMPETITIVE WISCONSIN

Vital communities and competitive incentives are essential to recruiting, attracting and retaining the workers Wisconsin needs today

Wisconsin is in the midst of a very real workforce crisis. We need to keep doing what we've been doing while also paying significantly more attention to helping employers recruit residential workers and their families from outside Wisconsin.

by Jim Wood, Strategic Counsel to Competitive Wisconsin, Inc. (CWI)

In March 2020 when we learned we were at pandemic risk, Wisconsin had more than 100,000 un-filled job openings, nearly two-third of which were in high-demand job categories that would have paid more than the state's average per capita income at that time.

The un-filled jobs numbers have gotten worse and the competition for workers almost everywhere is even more expensive and intense than it was then. It's gotten worse because it's become increasingly apparent that the states and communities that don't get ahead of their workforce shortage challenges are finding themselves unable to recruit, retain or attract the tax-paying employers and workers they rely on to fund the schools and other essential public services and grow their economies.

In Wisconsin, for example, decades-long declining birth rates, negative to negligible in-migration numbers, and the ensuing rapidly aging population, left our communities grappling earlier than most with workforce-shortage-driven tax-base and service erosions. As a result, while the competition for workers increased, Wisconsin communities and regions have been hard-pressed to make the investments they needed to compete effectively for the new generations of workers they must have to succeed.

The infusion of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds represents a unique, one-time opportunity to make our communities competitively attractive. These funds are federal tax-payer financed *investments* intended to enable communities to address fundamental and urgent needs, such as improving broadband access; responding to housing shortages; expanding early care and education opportunities; and maintaining transportation, health and public safety infrastructure; among others. The funding is substantial. Here in Wisconsin, for example, local units of government are scheduled to receive more than \$2 billion in ARPA funding. The state will get in excess of \$3 billion. And, separate substantial federal investments in transportation infrastructure are expected as well.

These investments could strengthen community, regional and state ability to recruit, attract and retain workers. The two most important questions now, therefore, are: 1) how to support our local elected officials as they work to identify and manage their investments wisely; and 2) how best to use the enhanced vitality and appeal of our communities to substantially increase the number of residential workers in Wisconsin?

Like local elected officials and other community leaders, most of us in the private sector understand that vibrant communities are essential to our efforts to recruit and retain workers and grow our local economies. We at Competitive Wisconsin Inc. (CWI) are working on *an effort* dedicated to enhancing decision-maker awareness of research and resources relevant to their needs and options; showcasing proven managerial analytical approaches for determining and assessing options; and sharing resources and skill sets with local and regional decision-makers as they plan, act and manage their ARPA investments.

With regard to leveraging improving community vitality and appeal to substantially increase the number of residential workers in Wisconsin, we must of course support and continue the excellent work already being done on up-skilling, training and retaining current Wisconsin workers. We must also continue to support efforts to pursue attraction campaigns dedicated to getting people who work in other states to live in Wisconsin while they do so.

That said, however, we can no longer ignore the fact that *it is impossible to address the economic threat Wisconsin faces; that is, to hire workers to fill the tens of thousands of unfilled job-openings currently inhibiting economic growth and community wellbeing without putting considerably more effort into the recruitment of non-Wisconsin workers and potential workers.*

Momentum West, the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce and CWI are convening a major Workforce Recruitment, Attraction and Retention Action Accelerator on these issues on August 11, 2022, at UW-Eau Claire. We are joined in our efforts by the Wisconsin Counties Association, UW-Eau Claire, UW-Stout, UW-River Falls, Chippewa Valley Technical College, St. Croix Economic Development Corporation, Greater Menomonie Economic Development Corporation, American Family Insurance, and others. Similar action accelerators and collaborations have been or are being convened to discuss broadband, housing, health care, energy, community quality of life and opportunity, early care and education and rural resurgence in other locations around the state.

For more information on CWI's efforts: <http://competitivewi.com>



Jim Wood is Chair of Wood Communications Group (WCG), a strategic communications company specializing in organizing and facilitating public-private collaborations, strategic planning, issue management, leadership training and community relations. Prior to co-founding WCG in 1984 with his wife, Dawn, Jim's career included academic, governmental and policy development experience.