



## Passion for Rural America Drives

### CEDA

#### **CEDA leader says passion for rural America drives company!**

Ron Zeigler will never forget a bit of advice he received from Clayton “Tip” Sisk just after he was hired to work at Sisk Standard Oil station in his hometown of Miller, S.D. Tip – who earned his nickname for tipping backwards on stools at his family-owned gas station – told the freshman-aged employee “if you don’t screw up, we know you aren’t working.” Sure enough, a short time later Zeigler put the wrong size oil filter on a truck during an oil change and oil spilled all over the floor. “The boss handed me a rag,” Zeigler recalled, “and said, ‘I told you so.’”



Zeigler – the CEO and president of Community and Economic Development Associates (CEDA) – has come a long way from pumping

gas and changing oil, but says he still uses that lesson today with his employees. “We have to have the ability to be comfortable to try things,” Zeigler said. “We don’t need everything perfect and right the first time.”

Zeigler joined CEDA in 2004 when it was called the Southeastern Minnesota Development Corporation, the sixth employee hired by the company that started in Rushford, MN in 1986 with a budget under \$300,000. Today – as CEDA celebrates its 40th year anniversary – the 501C3 nonprofit organization has more than 50 employees with a budget of \$4.5 million. “It’s been a good run,” Zeigler said. “A lot of good things have happened and a lot of good things have happened in communities in rural America.”

Zeigler’s story began in Miller, a rural community of about 1,300 and Hand County seat in east-central South Dakota. His parents were entrepreneurs with several businesses, including a Chevrolet and Buick dealership. Zeigler’s father died when Ron was 8, but he had already caught the business bug. Zeigler said Miller had an active Main Street business culture. “I wanted to do something in business and helping businesses was a part of that.”

Zeigler graduated from the University of Minnesota Morris in 1984 with a bachelor of arts degree in business economics with a political science minor. He then moved to St. Paul to work as Director of Development and Senior Loan Officer for Lancer & Associates, a real estate and investment company. City life with panhandlers and homeless was quite a culture shock, Zeigler said, but he gained valuable experience working on project management and construction for Lancer, which specialized in real estate investment shares for clients.

Zeigler moved into the public sector in 1990 when he became the Community Development Director and Director of Planning and Zoning for the city of Pine Island, MN. He worked as a Customer Service Representative for IBM in Rochester for a couple of years before taking the position as Executive Director of the Lake City Economic Development Authority. During his tenure in Lake City, Zeigler helped put together an incentive package that kept Federal-Mogul foundry – a major regional employer – in the city. Although the business has since closed, Zeigler said he was proud of being able to help keep it going at the time.

Zeigler said he was called by a Southeastern Minnesota Development Corporation board member when the CEO position opened up. When he took the position in 2004, the company had about a dozen contracts in southeastern Minnesota, compared to the 70-some CEDA has today all over Minnesota, in northeast Iowa and several locations in Wisconsin, with potential services coming to Illinois. “Not only have we grown in people and in revenue and in number of contracts, we have grown incredibly in services that we provide,” Zeigler said. Those services include grant writing, planning and workforce development.

The fundamental approach to that growth, Zeigler says, is wanting to help rural communities. “We take a position where we try to say ‘yes’ until we have a reason that we have to say ‘no’,” he said. “A lot of organizations take a ‘no’ approach and then come back and say ‘yes.’ Our board has been very flexible and supportive of the things we do and try.” Zeigler credits that flexibility for the ability of CEDA’s community support employees to combine community development with economic development.

“When I started in the public sector, our emphasis was on increasing the tax base and increasing jobs,” Zeigler said. “Now it’s more community culture and community amenities and providing the opportunity for a community to be ready for a business.” CEDA’s recent growth has resulted in a company reorganization with a new management and supervisory structure that Zeigler says still needs some tweaking but puts the company in a stronger position.

Zeigler also says it’s the CEDA employees and the work they do in rural communities that keeps him motivated and engaged. “In my mind and in my heart, there are two reasons why I continue,” he said. “The first is, I believe we make a difference in people’s lives in rural America. They can tell when a community is involved in CEDA and then they are not, because there is a sense of optimism and a sense of hope. “The second reason is the people we have that work for us and the opportunities we can provide for mentorship and growth,” Zeigler said, mentioning the intern program and the experience they receive. The names and faces change, but the mission stays the same: passion for rural America. “If you don’t have the passion, you won’t fit well in this position,” Zeigler said. “We hire professional people and we want them to be able to lead their communities.”

Because in the end, Zeigler says, CEDA is an organization built on its staff. That staff in 2025 provided more than 51,000 hours of direct on-the-ground support in their communities and spearheaded more than 100 grants totaling more than \$8.1 million. “We have learned over all these years that our people are our No. 1 asset,” he said. “It’s the No. 1 reason why a community stays with us – it’s our team members.”

## **Fillmore County Selected for Rural Child Care Innovation Program; Town Hall Event Announced**

Child care is an economic driver for rural communities across the United States, but many communities are facing shortages of high-quality child care. To help address this need, Fillmore County has been selected by First Children’s Finance to participate in the Rural Child Care Innovation Program (RCCIP).

The Rural Child Care Innovation Program is a community engagement process designed to address the challenges of child care in Greater Minnesota. Applications were received from communities across the state, and Fillmore County was among those selected to participate. Vergas is an additional CEDA community participating in this program.

Funded by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families, Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, and Taylor Family Farms, Inc., the RCCIP is based on the idea that rural communities are greater than their size in numbers and stronger than their current challenges. By mobilizing and empowering local communities, the program works to change the landscape of early care and education in rural Minnesota.

Fillmore County is participating in an up to 18–24-month process to identify local child care needs and challenges, explore right-sized solutions, and implement goals developed through community input.

In November 2025, First Children's Finance conducted a detailed analysis of child care needs in Fillmore County and estimated a need for approximately 300 additional child care slots for children under the age of five. In the coming months, additional data will be collected through community surveys, interviews, and other engagement activities to further understand local child care needs and challenges.

The effort is being led by Allison Whalen of the Fillmore County Economic Development Authority, Michelle Marotzke of the Preston and Lanesboro Economic Development Authority, and Shelby Antoff of Fillmore County. It is supported by a local Core Team that includes: Mandy Huston (Preston Area Chamber of Commerce); Umbelina Cremer (Harmony Kids Learning Center); Mary Schwarz (F & M Community Bank); Lynn Ptacek (MiBroadband); Angi Kaase (Fillmore Central School District/One Block at a Time); Chris Hahn (City of Spring Valley EDA); Brenda Pohlman, Jessica Erickson, Krista Skaalen, Stephanie Mensink (all of Fillmore County); Fillmore County Commissioners Mitch Lentz and Larry Hindt; Jackie Prescher and Jocelyn Victorino (Families First of Minnesota); and Kelly Fluharty (Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation).

As part of this work, a community-wide Child Care Town Hall Event will be held on July 28, 2026. All Fillmore County community members are invited to attend to learn more about the data collected, better understand the child care challenges in the area, and help identify solutions to support the local child care workforce and increase access to care. This event is free and dinner will be provided.

In addition to the Town Hall, a Child Care Provider Appreciation event will be held on May 7, 2026 to recognize and support Fillmore County child care providers.

To register for the Child Care Town Hall Event, please contact Allison Whalen at [allison.whalen@cedausa.com](mailto:allison.whalen@cedausa.com).

# Placemaking in Action

Placemaking is about creating meaningful experiences that bring people together; blending economic development, community identity, and quality of life into one strategy. One of the most powerful (and *fun*) examples of placemaking in action is something many CEDA communities know and love: Music in the Park.

Music in the Park may seem like just a free concert series, but it's also a powerful way to bring people together and support local economic activity. Each event is a simple idea with big impact: drawing residents and visitors into shared public spaces, encouraging spending at local businesses, showcasing local talent and small entrepreneurs, and consistently activating parks and downtown areas in meaningful ways. These gatherings turn ordinary spaces into community anchors. The ripple effect of these events extends far beyond a single evening. Local businesses benefit from increased foot traffic and visibility. Visitors become repeat guests, strengthening tourism. Residents feel more connected, increasing community pride and retention. This is how placemaking supports long-term economic development, making your community somewhere people choose to be.

Successful placemaking happens through collaboration. Organizations like CEDA bring expertise, strategy, and capacity to help communities turn ideas into impactful initiatives. By working alongside local leaders, businesses, and volunteers, CEDA helps identify opportunities for community-driven development, supporting event planning and implementation, and leveraging resources & partnerships for greater impact. This kind of collaboration transforms events like Music in the Park into a strategic investment in community vitality. This is the perfect example of a low barrier high impact investment. As our communities continue to grow and evolve, placemaking will play an increasingly important role in shaping local economies and quality of life.

CEDA Communities like Benson and Pelican Rapids are great examples of how thoughtful collaboration can turn simple events into meaningful economic opportunities. One standout approach has been the intentional inclusion of non-profit food vendors. This opportunity has given local organizations a built-in fundraising and awareness event. Concertgoers connect with local causes while enjoying the event while the community benefits from reinvestment, as funds raised often go right back into local programs and services. Through partnership with CEDA, these events have evolved into purposeful community experiences that enhance the economic vitality of Benson and Pelican Rapids.



## **Where Community Meets Opportunity: Explore the New Cohasset City Website**

CEDA recently assisted the City of Cohasset in launching its newly redesigned website, an important step forward in how Cohasset will better connect with residents, businesses, and future development partners. Thoughtfully designed with both usability and growth in mind, the new site strikes a strong balance between providing essential community information and showcasing opportunities for the future.

For residents, the website serves as a reliable, easy-to-navigate hub for important city updates, services, and resources. Whether looking for meeting information, community news, or general services, users will find a streamlined experience that makes staying informed simpler than ever.

At the same time, the new website places a strong emphasis on economic development. A dedicated Development section highlights city-owned properties currently available for development, as well as opportunities within the Cohasset Industrial park. This centralized resource is designed to attract investment while making it easier for developers and entrepreneurs to explore what the community has to offer.

Businesses, both new and expanding, will find valuable tools within the Development pages. From a curated list of business resources to a comprehensive business directory, the site is built to support growth at every stage. These features not only help connect local enterprises, but also demonstrates the City's commitment to fostering a strong and collaborative business environment.

Beyond data and listings, the website tells the story of what makes the community a truly special place to live and work. It highlights the unique qualities that define Cohasset, from its welcoming atmosphere to its economic strengths and high quality of life. For developers and site selectors, key information such as the community profile, reasons to choose Cohasset, and an overview of local strengths are clearly presented and easily accessible.

This new website is more than just a digital upgrade; it is a reflection of the City's vision for the future. By combining transparency, accessibility, and opportunity in one place, it serves as a powerful tool for residents, businesses, and investors alike.

We invite everyone to explore the new site and discover all that Cohasset has to offer.

Visit [www.cohasset-mn.com](http://www.cohasset-mn.com).



## **CEDA keeps economic development at the forefront in Rural America**

Late last month, the City of Pine Island announced that Google is the first tenant for the proposed new data center project (Project Skyway) in the city, with Minnesota-based Ryan Companies US, Inc. as the developer. The first building on the 482-acre site will be an approximately 285,000 sq. ft. complex, comprising a data center and office space. CEDA's own Mitch Massman, who contracts with the City of Pine Island, assisted city staff with navigating the business subsidy application, researching, and other activities for the development.

Ryan Companies and Google have committed to covering 100% of all infrastructure costs needed for the development. The project will be an economic catalyst for the city, creating approximately 100 permanent jobs for the first building and hundreds of temporary construction jobs. Additionally, an increase in tax base, local partnerships for economic and community initiatives, and workforce development are expected to strengthen the entire community.

Google also announced a pledge of \$25 million over the next 20 years to establish the Panther Program, a fund for Pine Island Public Schools. This initiative will help the school district expand STEM education, modernize classroom technology, and direct workforce pipelines for Pine Island students.

This continued collaboration between the City of Pine Island and Pine Island Public Schools, along with funding from Google, will strengthen the opportunities for students and community members to develop and participate in new types of education, resources, and career paths. Additionally, the added innovation will provide a more well-

rounded and modern education needed for students to pursue collegiate opportunities or enter the workforce directly.

Regarding sustainability, Google has pledged to minimize environmental impact. The company will pay for 100% of the electricity required to run the facility, along with associated grid infrastructure. Google and Xcel Energy are partnering to add 1,900 megawatts of new clean energy to the grid, including 1,400 MW of wind, 200 MW of solar, and 300 MW of long-duration energy storage. Xcel has committed to ensuring that new large loads do not increase costs for existing customers and that service remains reliable. Furthermore, the facility will utilize advanced air-cooling technology, limiting water usage strictly to bathroom and kitchen facilities.

City staff will continue to collaborate with Google, Ryan, and local partners as the project advances, ensuring that community support and education remain central to this investment in Pine Island's future.

## **Strengthening Rural Wisconsin**

I grew up in a rural community and am proud of it.

I was a farm kid living at the end of a dead-end road in a town of about 500 folks scattered throughout the 36 square miles in western Jackson County in Wisconsin. Our cultural center was maybe two dozen residents who lived in a few houses around the Franklin Store and my grandfather's former gas station across the road.

The closest larger communities were Melrose, Ettrick, Taylor and Blair, all about 10 miles as the crow flies from our farm. Melrose and Ettrick hovered around 450 residents and Taylor was about 350. Blair was a city of 1,000 and had a plethora of shopping options – several restaurants, hardware stores, two grocery stores, a lumber yard, car dealer, pharmacy and even a Radio Shack store.

Today all of those businesses are gone, with a few bars and eating establishments and a few retailers remaining. There are empty buildings and some of the former downtown businesses are converted to housing.

I am not picking on Blair, a community where I have fond memories and is home to lots of good folks. But the story of Blair can be repeated all over in other rural parts of our country. It's a story about a community that once had a thriving commercial center with businesses that were supported by the surrounding small family farms.

Most of that small farm economy has disappeared, along with the small businesses it supported. Also gone are the larger farm families that once helped fill our classrooms. What remains are smaller communities with aging housing stock, declining school enrollment and downtown commercial districts needing a new entrepreneurial purpose.

It's one of the stories of rural Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa, where challenges and opportunities intersect in smaller communities. It's a territory very familiar to CEDA and its focus on helping smaller communities accomplish great things.

It's also one of the focuses of the Rural Policy Institute (RPI), a nonpartisan coalition that is trying to create a unified voice for rural Wisconsin. The organization was established in 2024 by the Wisconsin Farm Bureau, Wisconsin Towns Association and Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association.

Recently I attended the first Rural Policy Institute Summit held in Stevens Point, hosted by the Wisconsin Institute for Sustainable Technology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. More than 100 people from rural partners around the state gathered to engage and collaborate in small group discussions.

I was invited to attend because of my work as a CEDA employee and in my role as head of the 7 Rivers Alliance, a regional economic development organization serving western Wisconsin. I have put helping rural communities high on our organization's priority list and recently announced a \$250,000 grant program to assist businesses in communities of 4,000 or less.

Mike Koles, executive director of the Wisconsin Towns Association, opened the summit by using a comparison to the David v. Goliath story in the Bible. He said David was really not the underdog because of his choice of weaponry in slaying Goliath. "Rural areas are not the underdogs," Koles said.

Other speakers included John Miller, the CEO and president of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp., which has given RPI a \$100,000 Capacity Building Grant to develop a playbook on economic development initiatives that advance rural priorities in Wisconsin.

Miller talked about WEDC's Office of Rural Prosperity and its Thrive Rural program, which works with local economic development organizations to launch projects to create thriving communities.

Clara Hedrick of the LaClare Family Creamery in Malone, WI talked about building the business milking dairy goats and the creation of the Quality Dairy Goat Producers Cooperative of Wisconsin, which serves 150 family farms.

Rural Wisconsin is not just about small communities and farms, but also about forestry, an important message shared by Paul Fowler, executive director of the Wisconsin Institute for Sustainable Technology.

Forests cover half of Wisconsin and the forestry industry supports 57,000 jobs and contributes \$24 billion annually to the state's economy, Fowler said. In between speakers we had small group table discussions on topics like sharing rural Wisconsin success stories, advocating for rural Wisconsin and how we move forward together.

But what is rural? Last year RPI issued a report called "Rural-Urban Balance in Wisconsin" which defined Wisconsin's population as being 41% rural or rural adjacent.

It's a needed update on the rural classification used by the US Census Bureau that said any municipality of 2,500 or more was no longer rural. Medium-density municipalities larger than 2,500 which are not part of a larger metro but instead are surrounded by rural areas are classified as rural adjacent. That covers many Wisconsin communities.

I was impressed with the gathering, the caliber of the participants, their knowledge and their passion for rural Wisconsin. Bob Welch, executive director of RPI, said highlights from the table discussions and the summit will be aggregated for future next steps to deal with challenges and opportunities in rural infrastructure, healthcare, workforce, education, economic development, the urban-rural divide, broadband and others.

That's not to say our cities and metro areas aren't important. When our cities sneeze, rural folks catch the cold. But we must create a healthy, vibrant rural environment across Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa that makes all of our communities strong.

CEDA has 40 years of experience helping strengthen rural communities. We can't turn back the clocks, but we can create a new future. As a proud farm boy, I will roll up my sleeves and help where I can.

## **CEDA Announces Fourth Cohort of Rural Business Innovation Lab**

CEDA is proud to announce our newest cohort of the Rural Business Innovation Lab (RBIL). Since its inception in 2023, RBIL has assisted 34 businesses in scaling their operations, accessing financial resources, creating quality jobs in rural communities and connecting with industry leaders and experts. This year, RBIL will support 12 innovative businesses throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin in achieving their business goals.

We're excited to announce this year's cohort businesses:

1. ***A Woolen Forest Farm:*** A Woolen Forest is a small farm and studio dedicated to conserving heritage sheep breeds and preserving traditional wool and textile arts through hands-on education and fiber production.

2. **Abundant Ag:** Abundant Ag LLP is an agricultural innovation company that converts processed food waste into cost-effective, sustainable livestock feed, helping reduce feed expenses for pork producers while diverting waste from landfills and creating value for food manufacturers.

3. **BuzzCare:** BuzzCare uses drone technology to deliver vital prescription medications straight to rural communities. This service

ensures that families have access to the medications they need, when they need them.

4. **BiFrost Butters**: Bifrost Butters is an artisanal food maker crafting chef-inspired compound butters from premium and locally sourced ingredients on a Western Wisconsin farm, bringing restaurant-quality flavor to home cooking while supporting community and charitable causes.

5. **Chisholm Trail Farm**: Chisholm Trail Farm is a multi-generation Minnesota family farm that grows, mills, and sells regeneratively produced grains and fresh stone-milled flours, emphasizing soil health, transparency, and farm-to-table quality.

6. **Clean Chickens Co.**: Clean Chickens Co. provides mobile poultry processing and consulting services, helping small farmers humanely and conveniently process birds while promoting accessible, sustainable food systems.

7. **Forge Creative Co.**: Forge Creative Co. helps small businesses build strategic brands through custom website design, logo creation, branding, and ongoing marketing support to strengthen their digital presence and growth.

8. **Full Circle Farm**: Full Circle is a fifth-generation Minnesota farm, mill, and micro-bakery dedicated to providing the community with sustainably grown whole grains, freshly milled flours, and naturally leavened sourdough breads, offering custom milled flours, fresh-baked goods, and bulk grains.

9. **Ice Pirate Fishing**: Ice Pirate Fishing designs and sells innovative, patent-pending ice fishing tools like the Ice Pirate tip-up to make ice fishing easier and more enjoyable for anglers of all ages by reducing frustration and improving catch success.

10. **KartVeyor**: KartVeyor is a cutting-edge ag-tech company that designs and manufactures a patented multi-crop cart that dramatically speeds up and simplifies the harvest offloading process allowing farmers to offload up to 35 tons of product in under two minutes, boosting safety and efficiency during harvest.

11. **Popple Creek Farms**: Popple Tree Creek Farms is a veteran-owned Minnesota family farm that grows American elderberries and crafts small-batch, farm-to-consumer wellness products, such as syrups, teas, honeys, and skincare, using sustainable, regenerative practices rooted in health, transparency, and connection to the land.

12. **Swinery**: Swinery is a Minnesota-based cleantech company that develops proprietary systems to convert agricultural waste into renewable energy, helping farmers reduce environmental impact while generating new revenue through a scalable, waste-to-energy model.

Community and Economic Development Associates | 1500 South Hwy 52 PO Box 483 | Chatfield, MN  
55923 US

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