

Set to Take Off

The story of the Woodman's Sports & Convention Center

By Ashley Pettay

The largest public-private partnership in history - the **Woodman's Sports & Convention Center** - is just over one year away from coming to life and is on track to become a pivotal economic and social hub for the city and the greater stateline area. Slated to open in the late summer of 2025, this monumental project represents not just a new physical space but an opportunity to transform the former Sears site at Uptown Janesville into a vibrant center for sports, meetings, and conventions.

At the highest level, the goal of the Woodman's Center is to improve the quality of life for residents. Project organizers say this will be accomplished by providing a space to foster youth achievement through athletic and other extracurricular activities, improving public health outcomes, and catalyzing greater economic prosperity.

How does one space accomplish such lofty goals? Speak to early advocates of the project, and they say they were inspired by what the community told them, that Janesville needed something more than just a replacement for an aging ice arena.

The Nuts & Bolts

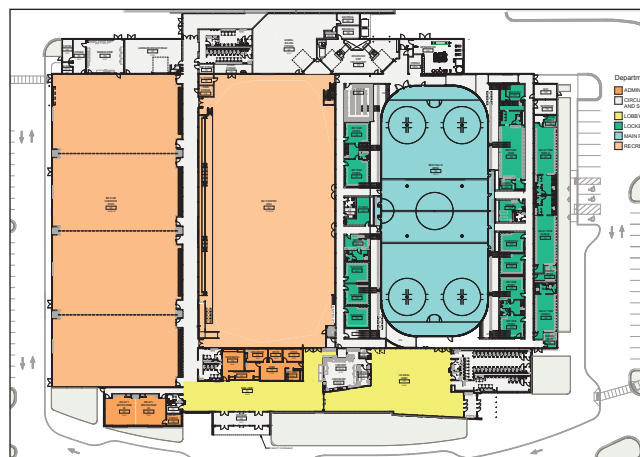
The Woodman's Center development will occupy 140,000 square feet of prime multi-use space and will be a game-changer in economic revitalization. It introduces the Mercyhealth Arena, a 1,500 seat ice arena, alongside a 250 seat multi-purpose venue for sports such as basketball and indoor soccer, plus the Robert & Delores Kennedy Conference Center, a 25,800-square-foot convention space for high-profile events and additional sports facilities. Once complete, the convention space will accommodate up to 1,200 people in a banquet-style format and offer 20,000 square feet of event space to support keynote speakers, meal spaces, break-out rooms, and trade show areas.

The complex will be built at the site of the former Sears store at Uptown Janesville and has been lauded for its visibility, its proximity to a dense concentration of hospitality businesses and as a midpoint between Interstate 90 and downtown Janesville. The site points to the city's progress in a comprehensive vision for revitalization that really started downtown and is working its way through other significant areas of the city.

The Woodman's Center will be a completely new development for Janesville and the region, especially in the world of meetings and conventions. The Janesville Area Convention and Visitors Bureau



Exterior of the Woodman's Center



Space layout of the Woodman's Center

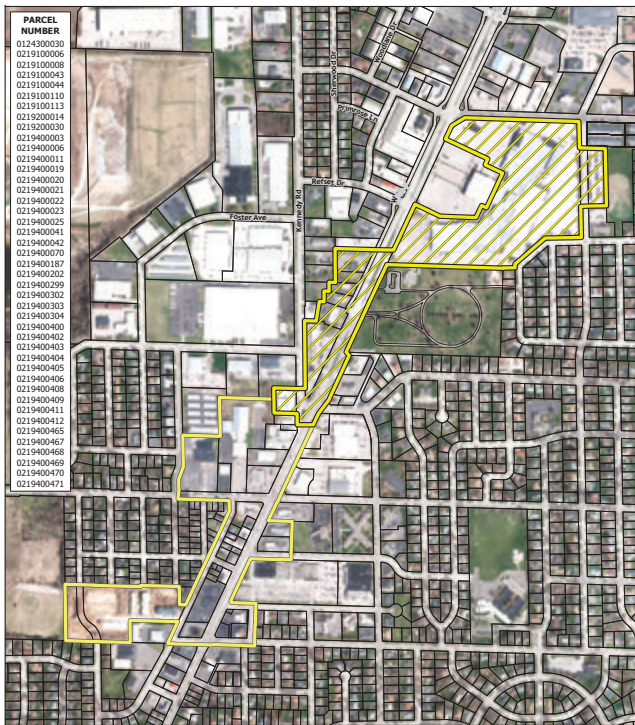
(JACVB), the organization tasked with attracting visitors to Janesville from outside of Rock County for business, sports and leisure, estimated the city has lost \$5 million in missed meeting and convention opportunities in the last five years because of space limitations. "Some of the larger effects will come from conferences and business meetings coming during the weekdays and helping support restaurants and other hospitality businesses that see slower business during the weeks. I think that is a benefit many haven't realized yet," said Paul Benson, former city council president.

Navigating a Path to Success

Once completed, the Woodman's Center will be the punctuation on an eight year process sparked by one imminent problem: the



Rendering of the soon-to-be Woodman's Center



TIF 38 along Milton Ave. expanded to include Uptown Janesville

Janesville Ice Arena, built 50 years ago, was rapidly nearing the end of its useful life and was no longer supporting the needs of its stakeholders. Many behind the project saw this as an opportunity to address several problems at once, beyond the needs of the ailing ice arena. What if a new facility could further expand the scope of youth sports and recreation while also providing much-needed meeting and convention space the city has never had access to?

The first public conversations around what would become the Woodman’s Center came in 2017 when the city announced it would conduct a feasibility study for a new indoor sports facility. The study was paired with the formation of an indoor sports complex steering committee tasked to make recommendations to the city council once the study was complete and support community engagement meetings.

The study conducted by Conventions, Sports and Leisure International came back in early 2019 showing a demand for an indoor sports complex in Janesville, specifically to service ice sports, multi-purpose court and turf sports, and recreational activities. *Proximity to I-90 and the commercial Milton Avenue corridor was one of the two primary location recommendations identified in the study.* The study included community feedback, competitor analysis, stakeholder interviews and other data analysis by the outside consultants.

In Spring 2019, the committee identified Uptown Janesville as the preferred location for a future sports complex following an evaluation of eight privately-owned sites and six city-owned properties. Later in 2019, the steering committee received an additional third-party recommendation from James Lima, an urban planner and placemaking expert, who was hired with funding from the Janesville Foundation to provide opinion on the impact the facility’s location would have on the community. Lima’s study

supported the steering committee’s recommendation to build the complex at Uptown Janesville, but specifically pushed for the complex to be built at the former Sears site rather than a previously identified plot on the backside of the building. This location would give the project “the dignity and civic presence of the best communal and civic places in Janesville,” noted Lima. By late 2019, a local advocacy group, Friends of the Indoor Sports Complex, now more commonly known as Friends of the Woodman’s Center, came to life focusing on fundraising and building community support. Early design plans had also started to take form.

By 2021, fundraising for the project was in full force in tandem with more detailed design efforts. This year brought the announcement of three major donors: Woodman’s, which donated \$3 million and gained naming rights for the complex; Mercyhealth, which donated \$1.5 million for naming rights on the ice arena; and The Kennedy Family Foundation, which donated \$500,000 to sponsor the flex space. As of February 2024, the Friends group collected more than \$9.5 million in pledges, making it the largest fundraising effort in the city’s history. Many of those pledges came from the "Together We Can" donor and public outreach campaign.

The last two years of planning and development were glittered with highs and lows, but wins like the \$1 million anonymous donation ultimately made the project a reality. It all led to the

As of February 2024, the Friends group collected more than \$9.5 million in pledges, making it the largest fundraising effort in the city’s history. Many of those pledges came from the "Together We Can" donor and public outreach campaign.

project’s greatest highlight so far: the February groundbreaking of the Woodman’s Center at Uptown Janesville. “Looking back at all the efforts that went into this project, had the council decided we won’t move this forward, or if the state had not stepped up, or \$5 million in federal funds had not come through, it would have been a lot of work and focus and time for nothing,” said Mike Payne, director of public works for the city. “There’s nothing better in what I do working for a community to put in the effort, have it come in under budget and have the council support the project. It has been absolutely wonderful and made it all worthwhile.”

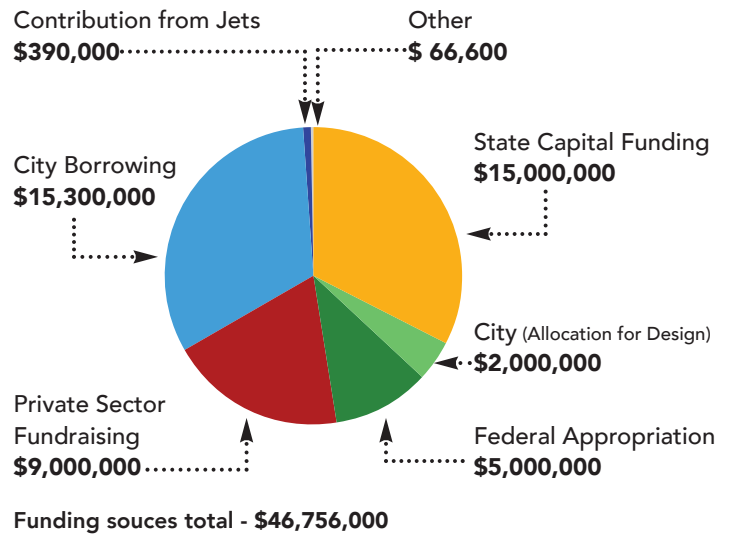
A Lesson in Resilience

It would have been nearly impossible for the largest fundraising effort in Janesville history to come to life without being met by challenges. The first came in 2020 when worldwide shutdowns and economic uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic put the project in a holding pattern, specifically with fundraising. Leaders at the time knew it would be inappropriate to launch a capital campaign or make significant requests for sponsorship given the hardships being felt by nearly every person in the world, including those in Janesville. Specifically, the hospitality industry that the project would largely support was being hit the hardest.

That did not halt the project completely. Officials behind the scenes continued to lay the groundwork and build strategy for the project to resume once the time came. And it did. By fall 2021, the

project's three largest private donors had come through and efforts were heavily focused around securing grant funding and support from state and federal entities by way of COVID-19 funding. The project was passed on during some of the state's early rounds of relief funding, but momentum continued.

The overall cost of the project and the community's public contribution to the cost have been hotly discussed since the project's inception. These conversations swelled in 2022 and 2023 as price estimates ballooned past what had been previously projected. With estimates exceeding the initial \$30-\$40 million price point to up to \$60 million, skepticism grew and feasibility



Of the lessons learned in this project, the greatest is in resiliency. The believers in the project stayed firm in their ambitions and because of that, the Woodman's Center is no longer a "what if," it's a "when."

seemed to be slipping out of reach in some minds. To add to the challenges, Gov. Tony Evers' pitch to provide the project with \$15 million in state aid was nixed from the state's budget by the joint-finance committee. That was on top of Rock County removing project support from its budget.

project being funded through local public dollars.

Of the lessons learned in this project, the greatest is in resiliency. The believers in the project stayed firm in their ambitions and because of that, the Woodman's Center is no longer a "what if," it's a "when."

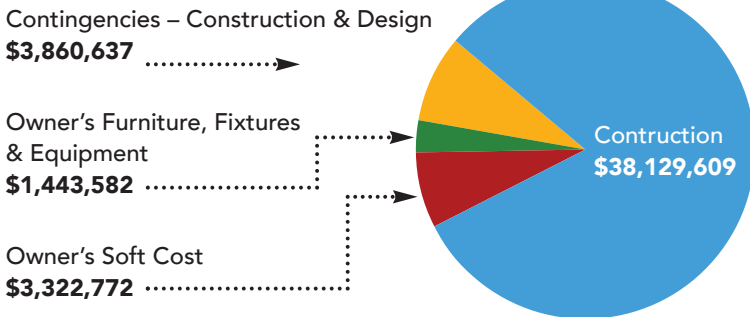
Inspiring Others

The Woodman's Center project is a significant bullet-point on the city's resume of public-private partnerships that local leaders say will set Janesville up for further success. The city's first foray into large-scale public-private revitalization was the ARISE downtown redevelopment plan. The ARISE Plan paved the way for projects like the Town Square and Festival Street, sponsored by Blackhawk Community Credit Union, an expanded Janesville Farmers Market, added information kiosks, the Blain Gilbertson Family Heritage Pedestrian Bridge, and more.

The Woodman's Center project capitalized on the momentum and foundation ARISE built. "It absolutely helps build the portfolio and the resume and the track record. It strengthens relationships in the community between government and the business community," Payne said. "We were successful and supported by the largest private fundraising campaign in the city's history. A lot of business owners recognized what we needed to do to make Janesville special. How do we diversify offerings and amenities for possible employees? And families? And business partners? And shoppers to this community?"

With two significant examples of private-public partnerships, Janesville is in a position to become a leader in community-driven economic development. Just as Janesville leaders and the Friends grouped looked to other communities for examples on what to do and not to do, other communities will look at Janesville's story to help them craft their own journeys. "I think it absolutely helps tell our story and allows other people to see when the Janesville community puts our minds to it, we have some credibility," Payne said.

The work done to thoroughly vet the project's location and feasibility provides a roadmap for other communities and makes things a whole lot easier for Janesville's business community to



Current cost estimate for the project - \$46,756,600

"When you got the \$60 million price tag and no state money committed, a lot of people said the city should give up on this," said Benson. "I will give credit to city and private leadership that kept the project going. I think in the face of a lot of adversity, it was definitely the narrative that the project was done. But people didn't give up."

Project leaders and city officials spent a lot of time volleying back and forth to find ways to pare down costs while maintaining the scope of the project. Teams found cost-saving opportunities and got creative in the project's design. Momentum continued to build, including up to the federal and state levels. In December 2022, Sen. Tammy Baldwin announced she secured \$5 million in federal funding for the Woodman's Center as part of the Senate Appropriations Legislation. Then, nearly a year later, Evers' office came through with funding from COVID-19 relief money to fill the \$15 million deficit previously cut by the joint-finance committee. A month later, Janesville-based contractor JP Cullen put the icing on the cake when they put in a low bid of \$38.1 million, right within reach of the project's original projections. The final price tag for the project is \$46.7 million, with just 37% of the

flourish, said Mark Gregory, South Central Regional President for Johnson Financial Group.

Johnson Financial Group is not only a Milton Avenue corridor business tenant, with a branch on Holiday Drive adjacent to the site of the Woodman's Center, but has clients that own a large amount of commercial property along the corridor. Since the announcement of the groundbreaking, Gregory said there has been an uptick in discussions and inquiries around acquisitions and remodeling of Milton Avenue properties. "There's a lot of preliminary discussions. This is a 15- to 18-month project so nobody is racing, but you can tell a lot of businesses are making sure they're in a strong capital position to be ready for the ultimate goal to cater to the new center," Gregory said.

In addition to new business prospects, several existing Milton Avenue area businesses are looking at making internal or external improvements to accommodate the increase in business slated to come, Gregory said. Benson said he's had conversations with

"I think it absolutely helps tell our story and allows other people to see when the Janesville community puts our minds to it, we have some credibility," Payne said.

business owners in the Milton Avenue area who have already cited plans to expand their offerings and renovate because of the development. "Little things like that will spill over," Benson said.

Gregory explained that when a significant development is planned in an area, for example when Walmart was built on Deerfield Drive, that signals to other like-minded or complementary businesses that the area is primed for business. That's because large-scale developers like Walmart are known for doing significant market research and data analysis before committing to a new location.

The same goes for the Woodman's Center, Gregory said. Local leaders, particularly the JACVB according to Gregory, provided a deep well of stress-tested data to support the Woodman's Center and prove the economic impact it will have. That instills trust from existing and prospective businesses to improve or put roots down in Janesville. "It is easier for businesses to look at Janesville. It gives your current business community more optimism in investing



Groundbreaking with Janesville City Manager Kevin Lahner, Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers, and U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin (L to R)



Jennifer Petruzello connecting with future users at the Woodman's Center Community Day event

in their footprint," Gregory said. "New eyes and new faces will be in your community. You're thinking to yourself, am I in the position to capture that market share? The Woodman's Center project and supporting data gives you confidence in your return on investment."

It Takes a Village

Much of the reason the Woodman's Center is positioned to make a positive impact on the business community is because the business community was involved from the start. More than a dozen local businesses have made financial or in-kind donations to the project. One of the most substantial was Uptown Janesville's creativity in supporting the project through its \$1 sale of the land and flexibility in providing the space the project needed to best benefit all parties involved.



Community Day guests playing pickleball

Business and non-profit leaders stepped up to voice support, which was a fundamental step in making the project happen. Leaders like Jane Blain Gilbertson, Matt Kealy, Quint Studer, Jessica Locher, Kathy Hansen, Ladd Udy, Cheryl Peterson and others helped develop a message that the community was united in this goal across several industries and regions of the city.

Active Friends group ambassadors also volunteered their time and resources through community outreach activities and facilitating public listening sessions around the project. One of the

largest community events the Friends held was in April 2023, when more than 1,500 individuals stopped by the Woodman's Center Community Day event in the former Sears building. While enjoying activities to mimic what an activated Woodman's Center would feel like, attendees could also talk in real-time with project organizers to learn more and provide community feedback. That feedback was used to continue conversations with project supporters, including Gov. Tony Evers.

Both Gov. Tony Evers and U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin attended and spoke at the groundbreaking event in February. "This project will help transform this area of the city and help one of our state's fastest-growing communities to thrive going forward," Evers said during the groundbreaking event. The Woodman's Center will "bolster local tourism and have a positive effect that will be felt across the state. I'm happy our administration could be a partner in supporting this innovative project."

What's Ahead

The greatest economic impact from travel and tourism comes from overnight visitors, and the best way to increase overnight visitors outside of weekends and holidays is through business travel. Research led by the UW-Whitewater Fiscal and Economic Research Center shows the center would create an annual economic impact of \$23 million and a one-time construction impact of nearly \$75 million.

Bringing meetings, conventions, trade shows, sporting events, and expos to Janesville doesn't happen by chance. The team at the JACVB, led by Christine Rebout, has been instrumental in

spearheading the private side of the project since 2019. In addition to funding early stages of the design and feasibility study processes, the JACVB has committed to providing 10% of room tax revenue over five years for facility sales and marketing, worth an estimated \$75,000-\$100,000 per year, renewable for another five years. The JACVB also committed approximately \$100,000 in annual in-kind support and is expanding their own staff to meet demand. To support the Woodman's Center and sporting events across northern Rock County, the JACVB is hiring a Director of Sports Sales. Sporting events, meetings, conventions and other group business often book out several years in advance, which is why the JACVB team has already started marketing and researching possible clients more than a year before the center is open.

Business community members can drive group business to the Woodman's Center through an initiative called "Bring Your Meeting Home." If business leaders attend conferences, trade shows, expos, or other meetings that could be hosted in Janesville, Rebout's message is contact the JACVB. "As we look toward the completion of the Woodman's Center, it's clear that the journey reflects Janesville's resilience and commitment to community enhancement," said Rebout. "This project is not just about constructing a building; it's about creating a legacy of collaboration, innovation, and community pride."

"This project is not just about constructing a building; it's about creating a legacy of collaboration, innovation, and community pride."

YOU EARNED THOSE CREDITS. WE COUNT THEM.

uww.edu/rock



University of Wisconsin
Whitewater

Rock
County

**CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY:
BAAS DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAM**

