Chapter 1

Introduction & Demographics

INTRODUCTION

The City of Rhinelander is located in Oneida County. It is the only incorporated community in Oneida County and serves as the county seat. Rhinelander is a major commercial and industrial center of the "Northwoods". The City has a population of over 8,300 people in 2024, which is about 22 percent of the total Oneida County population. This plan replaces the previous City of Rhinelander Comprehensive Plan adopted in 2016.

Wisconsin Comprehensive Planning Law

A comprehensive plan is a local government's guide to community physical, social, and economic development. Comprehensive plans are not meant to serve as land use regulations in themselves; instead, they provide a rational basis for local land use decisions with a twenty-year vision for future planning and community decisions. According to the Wisconsin Comprehensive Planning Law, a comprehensive plan must include at least nine elements (incorporated as chapters in this plan). These are:

- Demographics
- Agricultural, Natural and Cultural Resources
- Housing
- Transportation
- Utilities and Community Facilities
- Economic Development
- Land Use
- Intergovernmental Cooperation
- Implementation

State statutes prescribe a list of topics to address for each of the elements. This chapter reviews demographic data including the total population, age distribution, households, educational levels, employment, and income levels. Reviewing these trends is critical to understanding what has occurred and what is likely to occur in the future.

State statutes also indicate that if a local government unit enacts or amends any of the following ordinances, the ordinance must be consistent with that local government unit's comprehensive plan:

- Official mapping established or amended under s. 62.23 (6)
- Local subdivision regulations under s. 236.45 or 236.46
- County zoning ordinances enacted or amended under s. 59.69
- City or village zoning ordinances enacted or amended under s. 62.23 (7)
- Town zoning ordinances enacted or amended under s. 60.61 or 60.62
- Shorelands or wetlands in shorelands zoning ordinances enacted or amended under s. 59.692, 61.351, 61.353, 62.231 or 62.233

How to Use this Plan

A comprehensive plan is a local government's guide to community physical, social, and economic development. Comprehensive Plans are not meant to serve as land use regulations in themselves, and, instead, they provide a rational basis for local land use decisions with a twenty-year horizon for future planning and community decisions. The City's Comprehensive Plan is a dynamic – living document that can be amended at any time. The City's Comprehensive Plan should be used to:

- Guide local officials when making decisions that affect growth and development, especially decisions related to land use
- Guide public and private investment in the City and support grant funding requests
- Examine statistical data and community opinions to provide context for policies in the plan and to form a benchmark for future reference and comparison.

Planning Process

In the beginning of 2026, the City initiated a process to update its plan. The state planning law – 66.1001 – requires that a comprehensive plan be updated every ten years. A variety of Planning Commission meetings were held over the course of 2026 to prepare the plan. A final Planning Commission meeting was held in the [season] of 202X to review the final draft and recommend adoption of the plan by the City Council. The plan was adopted by the City Council in the [season] of 202X.

Public Participation

An important part of any planning process is public involvement. Public involvement provides the citizens of the City an opportunity to express their views, ideas, and opinions on issues that they would like addressed regarding the future development of the City. Local officials use this input to guide policies and decisions with greater awareness of the public's desires and consensus. See the adopted Public Participation Plan in **Appendix A**. The City of Rhinelander posted all Planning Commission meetings to invite the public and held a Public Hearing to collect public input.

Community History

Rhinelander was born in the boom days of logging. Settled in 1880, it was first called Pelican Rapids. Two years later is it was granted a charter and named after a man who probably never even saw the City—F.W. Rhinelander of New York. Rhinelander was president of the Milwaukee, Lake Shore and Western Railroad (now the Chicago and North Western), and the grateful residents renamed their community in his honor after the railroad agreed to come to the City.

Rhinelander was made to order for the logging industry, lying in a belt of 700 million feet of pine and 300 million feet of hemlock and other timber. With the completion of the railroad, the City became a terminal and supply point for the dozens of logging camps to the north towards the Michigan border. By 1890 trains were moving over four lines of track owned by three railroad companies.

Logging hit its peak in the lumberjack town during the 1890's. The demand for Wisconsin pine was seemingly insatiable, but the forest vanished at the rate of millions of feet a year. By the time of World War I, the industry was virtually at an end. As the logging industry faded, manufacturing took its place. Rhinelander became a major center in the area. Today the City is a retail and government center serving the entire Northwoods.

Source: City of Rhinelander

DEMOGRAPHICS

Population and Households

According to the latest data from the American Community Survey, the City of Rhinelander's population was an estimated 8,316 people in 2024. As shown in **Table 1**, this represents an increase of over seven percent since 2000. In comparison, the population of Oneida County had a slower rate of increase during this time at about four percent, while the State of Wisconsin increased by over ten percent.

Table 1: Population					
	2000	**2010**	**2020**	**2024**	**Change 2000-2024**
City of Rhinelander	7,735	7,798	8,285	8,316	7.5%
Town of Crescent	2,071	2,033	1,984	2,210	6.7%
Town of Newbold	2,710	2,719	2,831	2,866	5.8%
Town of Pelican	2,902	2,764	2,809	2,844	-2.0%
Town of Pine Lake	2,720	2,740	2,724	2,739	0.7%
Oneida County	36,776	35,998	37,845	38,167	3.8%
Wisconsin	5,363,675	5,686,986	5,893,718	5,914,872	10.3%

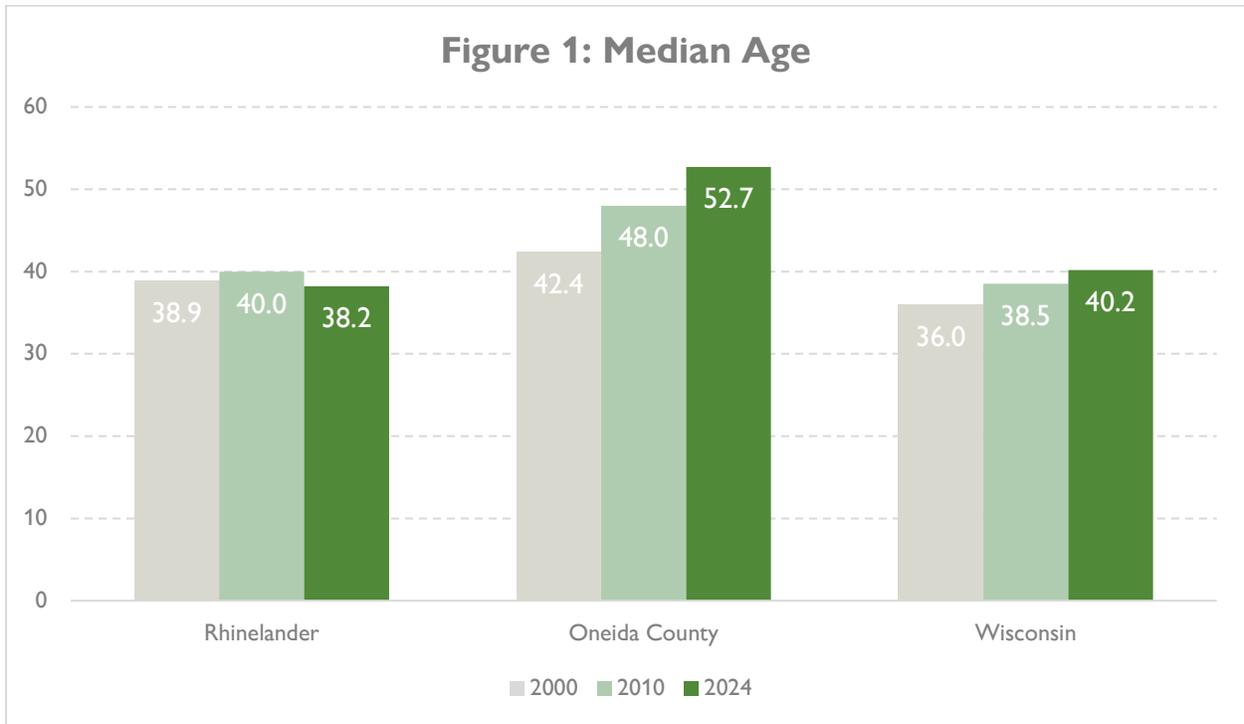Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey 2020-2024

Age Characteristics

As shown in **Figure 1**, the median age in the City of Rhinelander was 38.2 in 2024, lower than it was in 2010 (40.0). The City of Rhinelander's median age of 38.2 was lower than the median age in Oneida County (52.7) and Wisconsin (40.2) as a whole in 2024. Two age groups are particularly significant, those 65 and over and those under 18. The population under 18 is a dependent population that requires more services including quality childcare, schools, and specialized health care needs. Those 65 and over may require access to healthcare, transportation, and community services.

Between 2000 and 2024, the proportion of the population that was age 17 and younger within the City of Rhinelander decreased from about 23 percent in 2000 to about 19 percent in 2024, as shown in **Figure 2**. The percentage of the population below the age of 18 also decreased in Oneida County and Wisconsin as well during this time.
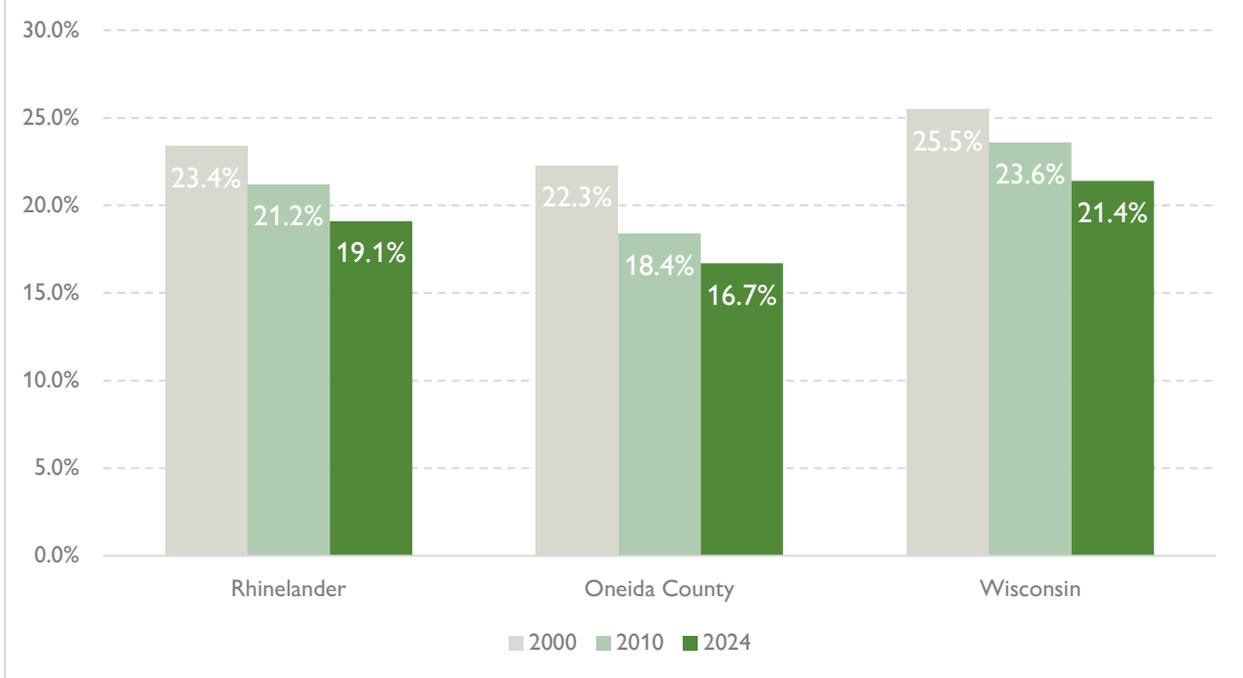
Figure 3 compares the proportion of the population ages 65 and older in the City of Rhinelander, Oneida County, and Wisconsin. Between 2000 and 2024, the percentage of the population age 65 and older within the City of Rhinelander slightly decreased from 20.5 percent in 2000 to 17.2 percent in 2024. In contrast, Oneida County and Wisconsin experienced significant increases in the proportion of the population age 65 and older.

Due to longer life expectancy and the size of the Baby Boomer generation, the 65 and older age group is expected to continue to increase in size. The trend is occurring at the state and national levels and to an even greater degree within the rural Wisconsin counties, especially in the northern one-third of the state. This population trend whereby older age categories increase significantly while younger age categories decline may impact the future labor supply, school system, and health care industry at the national, state, and local levels.
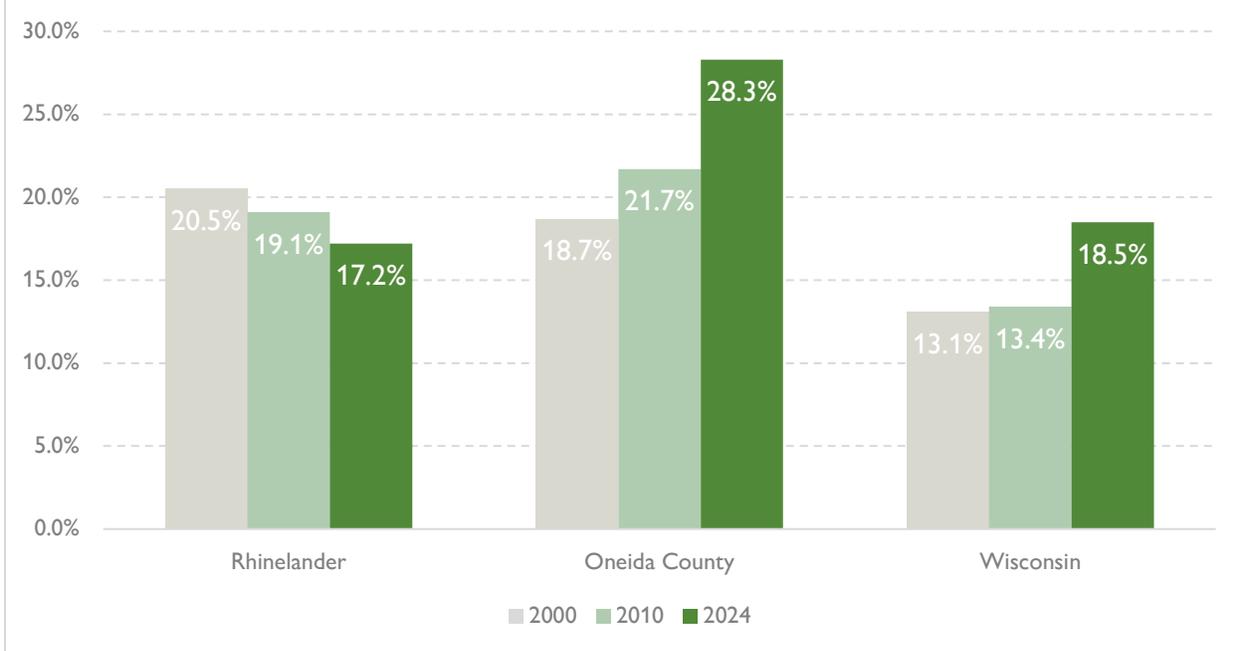
Figure 1: Median Age

Location	2000	2010	2024
Rhinelander	38.9	40.0	38.2
Oneida County	42.4	48.0	52.7
Wisconsin	36.0	38.5	40.2

Source: U.S. Census & ACS 2020-2024

Figure 2: Percentage of Population Below the Age of 18

Rhinelander: 2000 = 23.4%, 2010 = 21.2%, 2024 = 19.1%
Oneida County: 2000 = 22.3%, 2010 = 18.4%, 2024 = 16.7%
Wisconsin: 2000 = 25.5%, 2010 = 23.6%, 2024 = 21.4%

Legend: 2000, 2010, 2024

Source: U.S. Census & ACS 2020-2024

Figure 3: Percentage of Population Age 65 and Older

Rhinelander: 2000 = 20.5%, 2010 = 19.1%, 2024 = 17.2%
Oneida County: 2000 = 18.7%, 2010 = 21.7%, 2024 = 28.3%
Wisconsin: 2000 = 13.1%, 2010 = 13.4%, 2024 = 18.5%

Legend: 2000, 2010, 2024

Source: U.S. Census & ACS 2020-2024

Figures 4 and 5 compare the distribution of age groups for the City of Rhinelander and Oneida County. As shown below, the City of Rhinelander and Oneida County have contrasting population pyramids. Rhinelander's population skews towards the younger age groups, while Oneida County's population skews towards the older age groups.
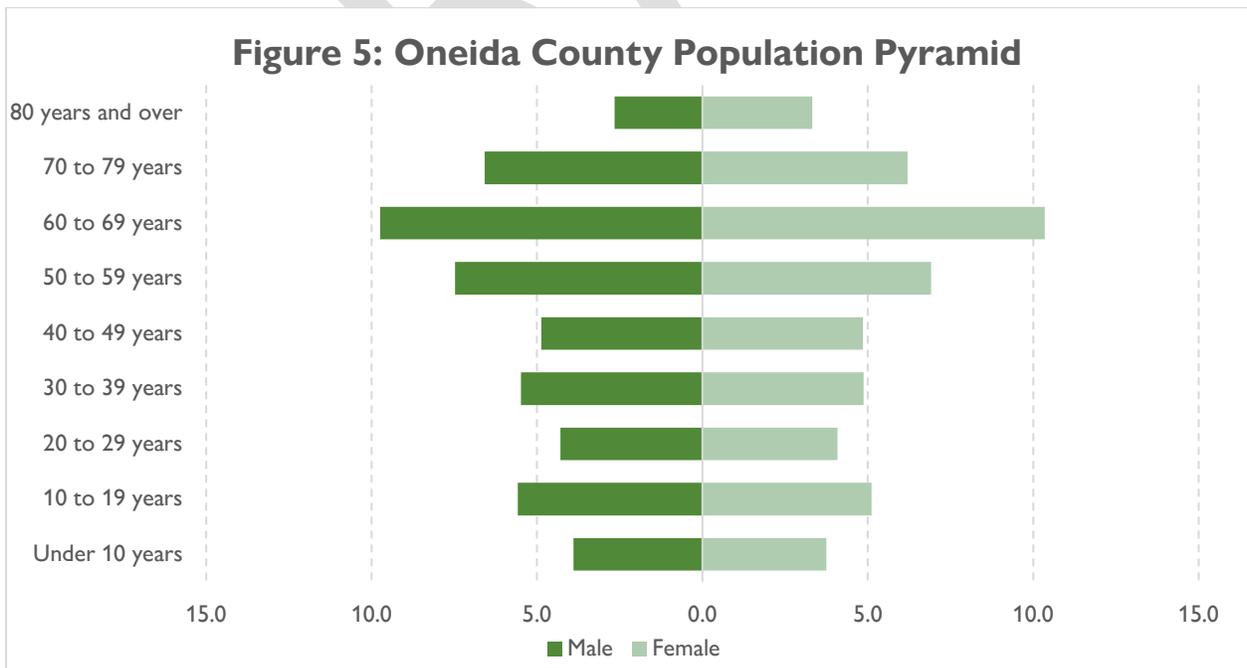
Figure 4: City of Rhinelander Population Pyramid

Source: U.S. Census & ACS 2020-2024

Figure 5: Oneida County Population Pyramid
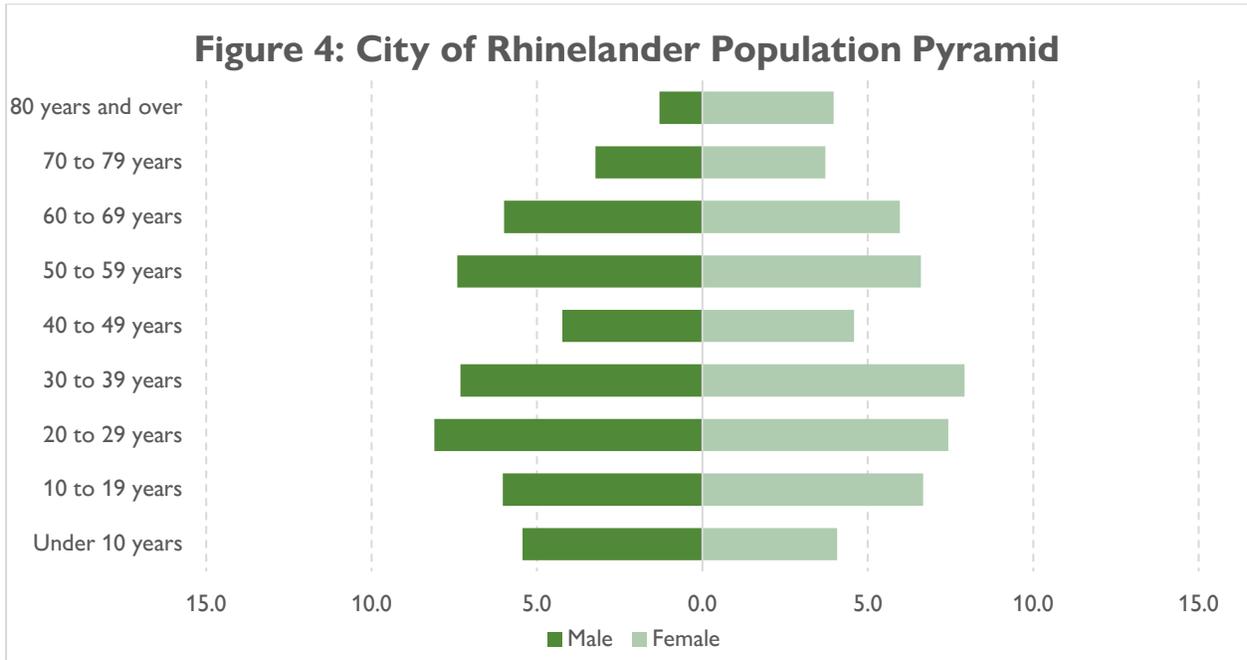
Source: U.S. Census & ACS 2020-2024

Households

A household includes all the people who occupy a housing unit as their usual place of residence. The City trend of households reflects the national trend of fewer people living within the same household. As more people decide to live alone and more couples are having fewer children or no children at all, the number of households has increased faster than the population as a whole. Most towns, the City, the County, and the State all gained population, but the average household size for all those municipalities has decreased over the last decade.

There were 3,573 households in the City of Rhinelander in 2024, which represents an increase of about 11 percent from the number of households in 2000, as shown in **Table 2**. During the same period, the number of households in Oneida County and Wisconsin both experienced slightly faster household growth. Among surrounding communities, the Town of Newbold experienced the fastest household growth during this time, increasing by over 20 percent. In 2024, the average household size in the City of Rhinelander was 2.33, down from 2.41 in 2000. In comparison, Oneida County's average household size was 2.18 in 2024, down from 2.40 in 2000.

Table 2: Total Households					
	2000	**2010**	**2020**	**2024**	**Change 2000-2024**
City of Rhinelander	3,214	3,545	3,794	3,573	11.2%
Town of Crescent	797	857	864	951	19.3%
Town of Newbold	1,114	1,176	1,262	1,343	20.6%
Town of Pelican	1,167	1,183	1,237	1,339	14.7%
Town of Pine Lake	1,063	1,136	1,201	1,206	13.5%
Oneida County	15,333	16,003	17,404	17,493	14.1%
Wisconsin	2,084,544	2,279,768	2,428,361	2,479,480	18.9%

Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey 2020-2024

Population Projections

Table 3 compares projected population in the City of Rhinelander and surrounding communities to Oneida County and Wisconsin, based off population projections conducted by the Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA). The DOA population projections are recognized as Wisconsin's official population projections and are based on historical population and household growth in the community, with more recent years given a greater weight. According to the DOA projections, the City of Rhinelander is projected to significantly decrease in population by 2050.

Table 3: Population Projections					
	2020	**2030**	**2040**	**2050**	**% Change 2020-2050**
City of Rhinelander	8,285	8,010	7,476	6,837	-17.5%
Town of Crescent	1,984	1,897	1,749	1,580	-20.4%
Town of Newbold	2,831	2,823	2,716	2,560	-9.6%
Town of Pelican	2,809	2,754	2,607	2,418	-13.9%
Town of Pine Lake	2,724	2,622	2,435	2,216	-18.6%
Oneida County	37,845	37,320	35,525	33,135	-12.4%
Wisconsin	5,893,718	5,890,915	5,841,620	5,710,120	-3.1%

Source: WI DOA Official Population Projections

Education and Income Levels

Education

Table 4 compares the percentage of the population ages 25 and older who have a high school diploma or higher, an associate's degree or higher, and a bachelor's degree or higher in Rhinelander, Oneida County, and Wisconsin. **Figure 6** shows the highest level of education completed by residents ages 25 and older. In 2024, about 94 percent of City residents ages 25 and older had a high school education or higher. This was slightly lower than the County and slightly higher than the State. In the City of Rhinelander, over 22 percent of the population held bachelor's or other advanced degrees compared to nearly 29 percent of County residents and over 33 percent of State residents.
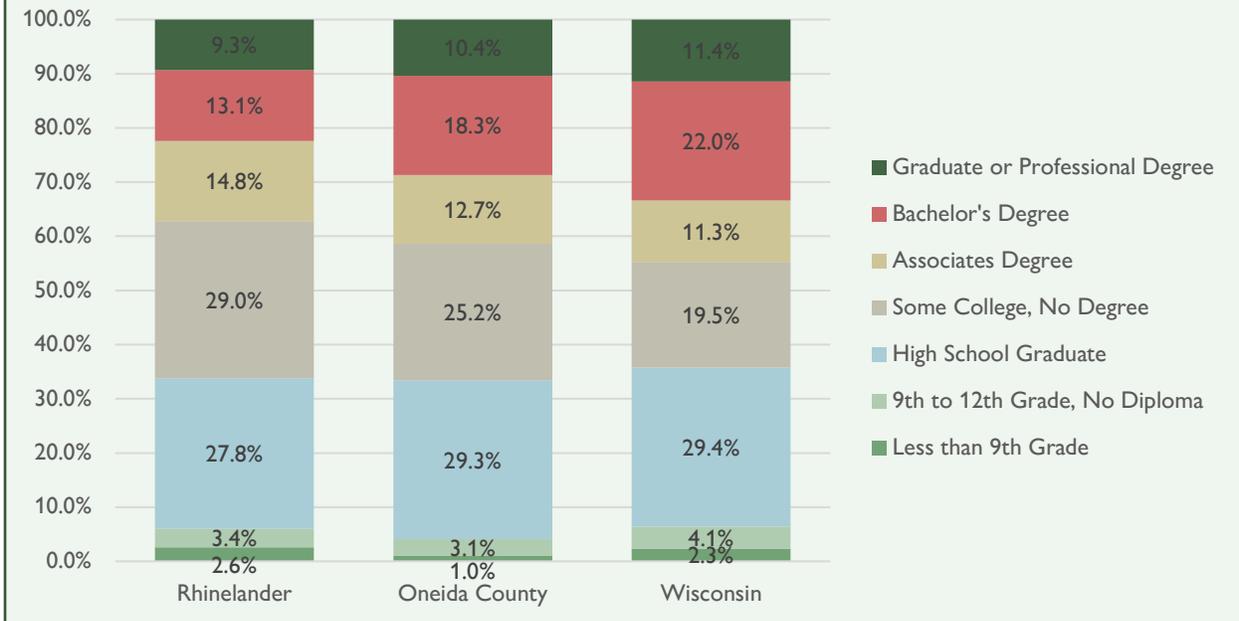
Educational attainment has improved over the past several decades. Since 2000, the number of high school graduates as a percentage of those over 25, increased in the City from 79.1 percent in 2000 to 94 percent in 2024. All of the surrounding towns, Oneida County, and Wisconsin all had increases as well.

Table 4: Educational Attainment, 2024			
	Rhinelander	**Oneida County**	**Wisconsin**
Percent high school graduate or higher	94.0%	96.0%	93.6%
Percent associate's degree or higher	37.2%	41.4%	44.7%
Percent bachelor's degree or higher	22.4%	28.7%	33.4%

Source: American Community Survey 2020-2024

Figure 6: Educational Attainment (Age 25 and Older)

	Rhinelander	Oneida County	Wisconsin
Graduate or Professional Degree	9.3%	10.4%	11.4%
Bachelor's Degree	13.1%	18.3%	22.0%
Associates Degree	14.8%	12.7%	11.3%
Some College, No Degree	29.0%	25.2%	19.5%
High School Graduate	27.8%	29.3%	29.4%
9th to 12th Grade, No Diploma	3.4%	3.1%	4.1%
Less than 9th Grade	2.6%	1.0%	2.3%

Source: American Community Survey 2020-2024

Income

Median household income and per capita income are two commonly used measures of income. Median household income is the income for the middle point of households, meaning half of all households fall below that income, and half are above. Per capita income is the measure of average total income per person.

Median household income for City of Rhinelander residents was $51,421 in 2024. **Table 5** shows that this was lower than Oneida County and the State of Wisconsin. Median household income within the City of Rhinelander was also lower than both the County and the State in 2010. When adjusted for inflation, median household income in the City increased by five percent between 2010 and 2024. During this time, median household income increased by over six percent in Oneida County and by 5.5 percent in Wisconsin.

Table 6 illustrates that income per capita in the City of Rhinelander was lower than both the County and the State in 2024. The City's per capita income was also lower than both Oneida County's and Wisconsin's in 2010. When adjusted for inflation, per capita income in the City of Rhinelander decreased by about three percent between 2010 and 2024. This was in contrast to the increases experienced by the County and State during this time.

Table 5: Median Household Income

Minor Civil Division	2000*	2010*	2024	2000-2024 % Change	2010-2024 % Change
City of Rhinelander	$54,123	$48,964	$51,421	-5.0%	5.0%
Oneida County	$68,734	$65,270	$69,371	0.9%	6.3%
Wisconsin	$80,011	$73,441	$77,485	-3.2%	5.5%

Source: U.S. Census and American Community Survey (2020-2024)

*: Adjusted for inflation

Table 6: Per Capita Income

Minor Civil Division	2000*	2010*	2024	2000-2024 % Change	2010-2024 % Change
City of Rhinelander	$29,320	$29,903	$29,065	-0.9%	-2.8%
Oneida County	$36,078	$39,974	$42,684	18.3%	6.8%
Wisconsin	$38,865	$37,895	$43,373	11.6%	14.5%

Source: U.S. Census and American Community Survey (2020-2024)

*: Adjusted for inflation

Employment Characteristics

Tables 7 and 8 illustrate the breakdown of the labor force and employed population living in the City of Rhinelander in 2010 and 2024. The "employed population" includes those that are 16 and older. Between 2010 and 2024, the City's labor force slightly decreased, as there were seven fewer individuals in the City's labor force in 2024 than there were in 2010. In contrast, Oneida County experienced a 5.7 percent decrease in labor force, while Wisconsin experienced a slight increase in labor force during this time.

Labor force participation indicates the percentage of those 16 years and over that are in the labor force. The labor force participation rate decreased within the City of Rhinelander from 2010 to 2024, dropping to 57.2 percent in 2024. Similarly, both the County and the State experienced decreases in labor force participation rates during this time.

Table 7: Labor Force Characteristics

Minor Civil Division	Labor Force			Labor Participation Rate	
	2010	2024	2010-2024 % Change	2010	2024
City of Rhinelander	3,960	3,953	-0.2%	60.0%	57.2%
Oneida County	18,886	17,812	-5.7%	61.9%	54.6%
Wisconsin	3,078,465	3,136,600	1.9%	69.0%	65.3%

Source: U.S. Census and American Community Survey (2020-2024)

In 2024, there were 3,913 employed residents in Rhinelander. This represents a three percent increase in employment among City residents since 2010, as shown in **Table 8**. In contrast, employment decreased in Oneida County during the same period, decreasing by about two percent, while the State experienced a 5.6 percent increase in employment during this time. The U.S. Census classifies individuals as unemployed if they are not working, actively seeking work, and available to accept a job. The unemployment rate in the City was 0.6 percent in 2024, slightly lower than Oneida County's rate of 1.1 percent and the State's rate of 2.1 percent.

Table 8: Employment				
	2010	**2024**	**2010-2024 % Change**	**Unemployment Rate**
City of Rhinelander	3,798	3,913	3.0%	0.6%
Oneida County	17,802	17,462	-1.9%	1.1%
Wisconsin	2,869,310	3,031,042	5.6%	2.1%

Source: U.S. Census and American Community Survey (2020-2024)

Table 9: Occupation of Employed Workers				
Occupation	**City of Rhinelander**		**Oneida County**	
	2010	**2024**	**2010**	**2024**
Management, Professional & Related	892	1,109	5,220	6,258
Service	798	608	3,184	2,616
Sales & Office	1,227	932	4,687	3,745
Natural Resources, Construction, and Maintenance	284	413	2,299	1,881
Production, Transportation & Mineral Moving	597	851	2,412	2,962
Total	3,798	3,913	17,802	17,462

Source: U.S. Census and American Community Survey (2020-2024)

As shown in **Table 9**, most residents in the City of Rhinelander were employed in Management, Professional & Related occupations. The second sector most represented was the Sales & Office occupation group, followed by Production, Transportation & Mineral Moving occupations. From 2000 to 2024, the most significant increase in employment were seen in Production, Transportation & Mineral Moving occupations.

Demographic Snapshot

- The City of Rhinelander has experienced an increase in both population and the number of households since 2000. Household growth within the City has outpaced population growth during this time, leading to a decrease in household size.

- The City of Rhinelander is projected to experience a significant decrease in population by 2050.

- The City's median age decreased from 40.0 in 2010 to 38.2 in 2024.

- The City of Rhinelander has a lower proportion of residents with a high school diploma than the County and a higher proportion than the State, and a lower proportion of residents with a bachelor's degree, or graduate/professional degree than the County and State.

- The City of Rhinelander's median household income of $51,421 in 2024 was lower than the median household incomes of Oneida County and Wisconsin. Additionally, per capita income within the City was also lower than both the County and State in 2024.

- The City's labor participation rate is slightly higher than the County's participation rate and is significantly lower than the State's participation rate, and the City's unemployment rate of 0.6 percent in 2024 is slightly lower than the State and the County.

- Most people in the City of Rhinelander work in Management, Professional, and Related occupations.

Goals, Objectives, and Policies

Each of the following comprehensive plan chapters concludes with a set of goals, objectives and policies, which will be used to guide the future development of the community.

For purposes of this planning process, goals, objectives and policies are defined as follows:

Goals: Broad statements that express general public priorities about how the community should approach development issues during the next 20 years. These goals are based on key issues, opportunities and problems that affect the community.

Objectives: More specific than goals and are usually attainable through planning and implementation activities. The accomplishment of an objective contributes to the fulfillment of a goal.

Policies: Rules or courses of action used to ensure plan implementation and to accomplish the goals and objectives. The policies are intended to be used by decision-makers on a day-to-day basis.