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## Celebrating innovation and entrepreneurship in Kenosha's Uptown *WEDC Secretary Hughes announces grant, visits small businesses*

**KENOSHA, WI. DEC. 11, 2023** – Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes and Deputy Secretary Sam Ridders are visiting Kenosha today to tour the soon-to-open Kenosha Emerging Leaders Academy (KELA) and announce a grant for the nearby Uptown Lofts redevelopment.

"In Kenosha, the state, local government, nonprofits, businesses and educators are all working together to build a neighborhood designed to inspire innovation and entrepreneurship," Hughes said. "We know that entrepreneurship is one of the best ways for communities to build transformational wealth and are proud to support the changes being made in Uptown."

WEDC has awarded the city of Kenosha a \$250,000 Community Development Investment grant to support the new Uptown Lofts development.

"Uptown Lofts, the Children's Library, and Kenosha Emerging Leaders Academy are laying the foundation for long-term success in Uptown, the Kenosha Innovation Neighborhood and throughout the city," Kenosha Mayor John Antaramian said.

The new development includes 71 workforce housing apartments along with commercial space and a new branch of the Kenosha Public Library, specifically devoted to children and increasing their reading skills. The first apartment tenants are scheduled to move in this month.

"The Uptown Lofts mixed-use development will be transformative for that neighborhood," said Nicole Ryf, president of the Kenosha Area Business Alliance (KABA). "The addition of much-needed affordable housing and a children's library makes the development even more attractive for residents of the Uptown Area and the entire city."

KABA worked with the city and developer Gorman & Co. to ensure that Uptown Lofts would have space for two businesses that had been located on the site and were destroyed by fire during 2020 protests following a police shooting. Construction is continuing on the commercial spaces – a neighborhood grocery store, La Estrella, and Uptown Restaurant.

"I am so thankful for the support of the Kenosha community, which has enabled my family to return and expand our grocery store at our original location within the Uptown neighborhood," La Estrella owner Abel Alejo said.

On an adjacent site, the city is poised to open the Kenosha Emerging Leaders Academy. The academy features programming to allow students and young adults to gain new skills and explore career pathways.

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It is also home to gener8tor's gBETA accelerator program. Entrepreneurs receive training, coaching and networking opportunities through gBETA and introductions to potential funders. While gBETA is designed to help any entrepreneur, it is focusing on reaching founders of color and women.

Kenosha gBETA, which is now recruiting for its third cohort of entrepreneurs, was started with a Workforce Innovation Grant worth up to \$990,000. The \$128 million grant program designed to help the state build the workforce of the future was funded by federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars and is administered by WEDC and the state Department of Workforce Development.

At KELA, Hughes and Ridders will tour the Best Buy Teen Tech Center, which is run by the Kenosha YMCA. The drop-in center for ages 12-18 is an interactive learning center with the technology needed for teens to explore computer programming, music and film production and design.

"The Kenosha YMCA is proud to be a partner with Jockey and Best Buy", said Cindy Altergott, Kenosha YMCA CEO. "The magic of the Best Buy Teen Tech Center will come from the students as they begin to collaborate and innovate on projects together."

The center was supported by a \$250,000 donation from apparel company Jockey, which is based in the neighborhood.

Late last year, Jockey opened a unique gift shop and café called Coopers Uptown in an historic building in the neighborhood that had housed a retail store for more than 100 years.

Hughes and Ridders are starting their visit in Kenosha today by visiting downtown retailers as the state celebrates "Shop Small Wisconsin" season. Through the end of the year, WEDC is encouraging everyone to support locally owned businesses.

"This season is the most important time of year for many small businesses," Hughes said. "Our communities rely on the local businesses to not only supply goods and services but to provide jobs and add vitality to our downtowns. Now is the time for folks, if able, to support these businesses that add to our communities."

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