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[00:00:34] **Speaker 1** This coming weekend, Memorial Day weekend, kicks off the summer tourist season in Wisconsin. In years past, tourism hotspots have seen difficulty hiring enough workers. Part of the trouble with hiring has to do with employees finding a place to live that they can afford in these sought after areas. This week, new workforce housing units opened in Vilas County in Lac du Flambeau. The two and three-bedroom units are very, very welcome, according to the chair of the Vilas County Economic Development Corporation, Jim Tuckwell. He joins us along with the developer, Kevin MacDonald, and thanks to both of you for being here.

[00:01:14] **Speaker 2** Thanks for having us.

[00:01:15] **Speaker 1** So Jim, first to you, why are these units so very welcome?

[00:01:22] **Speaker 3** Well, as you pointed out, Frederica, we, we badly need affordable housing here. Um, our, our population is skewed to older residents. We have a lot of retirees in Valos County and conversely, uh, the, the people that are age 20 to 34, those that would be looking for affordable housing, most likely as they're starting out their careers, um, we have, uh much fewer, like 8% fewer. People in residence in that age group than the state of Wisconsin. So we really badly need units like Kevin's to attract younger people who can join the workforce. As you pointed out,

[00:02:03] **Speaker 1** So Kevin, tell me about this new development of apartments. They're described as workforce housing, but also luxury affordable with rents ranging, I saw from about 900 to $1,200 a month. What are the units like?

[00:02:19] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I mean, the units are really great. They're all townhouse style units, individual entries, attached garages. All of the buildings have rooftop solar. And in terms of the affordability and the level, we have a wide range of residents that we're serving. So we have market rate units, which we have actually a tremendous demand for, a huge waiting list right now. We have... On the other end of the spectrum, something called 811 housing voucher units that are for folks that have some type of disability, physical, mental, emotional. There's a number of different types of disabilities that can qualify for those units, but those units are set aside for individuals with very low incomes, 30% or less than the county mean income. And then we have about 27 out of the 40 units are what we'd call kind of more traditional workforce housing units. Set aside for 50 to 60% of the Vilas County median income.

[00:03:20] **Speaker 1** Why did you decide to break ground in Lac du Flambeau?

[00:03:24] **Speaker 2** Um, so originally, um, when we started, it was kind of the beginnings of COVID, the work from home kind of movement was starting. And we saw a lot of people moving into areas like Vilas County, um and thought there'd be some of that trend would continue. Um, when We got into Vilas county and started working with Jim and the county and the local tribal members, we realized kind of how much of a need there was for the local, tribal members as well. So it was kind of originally more with kind of tourism, kind of economy in mind with the kind of work from home thought and then just the need in the area for the tribal members was tremendous as well

[00:04:14] **Speaker 1** Interesting. So Jim, how will 40 new two and three bedroom town homes help the affordable housing crunch in your county?

[00:04:25] **Speaker 3** Well, the key here is that this development serves not only Lacta Flambo, but also the surrounding community. So people typically commute anywhere from 10 to 30 miles for work, and so this is gonna serve a wide range of the surrounding communities.

[00:04:44] **Speaker 1** Jim, you've described that some people can't take jobs that are offered to them in your region because they can't find the housing. What are employers saying to you about that issue?

[00:04:59] **Speaker 3** Oh, we hear this and have been hearing it for a while from employers that in some cases they've offered and had jobs accepted. And then the individuals can't find an affordable place to live and have to turn the job down. Um, and others just aren't even applying for the jobs just because again, they can't a place to living in advance. So it's a very key issue in this. This serves a very, very significant need for us.

[00:05:26] **Speaker 1** Speaking of seasonal jobs, tourism, what does the worker shortage that we've experienced post-COVID look like this year?

[00:05:39] **Speaker 3** Well, it's significant. We continue to see a lot of help-wanted signs, and particularly in tourism-related retail and services businesses. So it's a very key thing.

[00:05:51] **Speaker 1** Kevin, you were talking about you originally went looking for the remote worker that would have moved north to build housing. What about that, the kind of demographic of folks that are now living outside of cities? Is that a kind of a new frontier for developers?

[00:06:13] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I mean, I think we're seeing some of that stick, for sure. I think it's kind of a constantly changing thing. Obviously, we're seen companies kind of backtrack on that policy, but we're also seeing a lot of companies kind of maintain that work, work from home, flexibility. So I think that will probably be here for a long time. But, yeah, so we're... The world has definitely changed a lot, right? And I think we are seeing kind of more of those features kind of incorporated into developments. We're adding Zoom rooms and things like that into some of our developments and just trying to keep that in mind. You know, internet, high speed internet is huge at all of our development. And we're trying to make sure we have really great options for residents to work from home when that's an option for them.

[00:07:13] **Speaker 1** How rewarding is it for you to build these affordable units for folks?

[00:07:18] **Speaker 2** Um, it's really, really rewarding. I mean, going to a grand opening or an open house where we get to see residents come in and like the smiles on their faces is priceless.

[00:07:31] **Speaker 1** And Jim, was that your experience as well with the open house that you had up there? I think that was just this week. What was the kind of response from folks?

[00:07:43] **Speaker 3** Oh, it's tremendous. I mean, we toured, we toward, you know, individual town homes, you a three bedroom town home with an attached garage and two and a half baths. I've been very, very high quality, very well done and very impressive. So it's a it's A phenomenal development.

[00:08:00] **Speaker 1** Great, we leave it there. Jim Tuckwell and Kevin MacDonald, thank you so much.