

Rural towns often face challenges ranging from waste management to finding energy solutions to ensure a sustainable future. To improve the quality of life in communities like mine, in the Town of Beaver Dam, local governments should prioritize a few key strategies. These include creating better recycling and composting incentive programs, supporting methane digesters or other clean energy sources, encouraging local food consumption, and promoting agritourism to strengthen the economy.

One of the best things rural governments can do is improve waste management for farms and rural households. Currently, many communities do not see the benefit of recycling plastics or composting food waste because of the added strain on the budget, without seeing immediate benefits. By offering incentives such as tax cuts and creating educational programs, towns can reduce waste going into landfills and at the same time improve soil quality. According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, more than 800,000 tons of compostable organic material is landfilled in the state each year. To make a difference in my area, I created and implemented a school-wide composting and recycling program at Beaver Dam High School during my senior year to reduce my school's carbon footprint. I collect food scraps from the cafeteria daily and paper waste from classrooms bimonthly. The food scraps are mixed with some of the paper waste to create nutrient-rich compost that will be used to mulch the trees in our school forest. I also make sure the leftover paper gets recycled properly to cut down on our school's waste. I believe that with stronger local programs, and better education, a lot of waste could be transformed into a valuable resource for farmers and gardeners.

Clean renewable energy is another powerful way to support both farmers and the environment. I had the chance to visit Crave Brothers Farm in Waterloo, where I saw how a

methane digester turns manure into electricity. The digester not only powers their dairy farm and cheese plant, but it also provides electricity to about 300 homes in the Waterloo area.

Additionally, the remaining manure is used as a fertilizer on their fields. This system reduces fossil fuel use and lowers greenhouse gas emissions. It also creates more opportunities for farmers to generate income, and helps us be better stewards of our resources to ensure the best future. I would like to see local governments take steps to make methane digesters more accessible for farmers through grants, or work to establish regional locations for farmers to transport manure to, and take back to use on their fields. According to the USDA, digesters also offer long-term economic benefits, helping farms become more resourceful, as well as helping to improve air quality as well as reduce pathogen runoff into water.

In addition to environmental initiatives, rural towns can significantly benefit from supporting local food sources and building agritourism. Towns can support farmers markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs. Growing up, my family had a CSA program where we delivered produce weekly to families in our community. We also sold at farmers markets. Having more support and awareness for events or opportunities like these can not only help the health and welfare of community members, but also encourage rural people with land to plant more than enough for themselves to serve others. Additionally, agritourism can provide educational opportunities and bring in new revenue. On a trip to Indianapolis for the National FFA convention, I visited Fair Oaks Farms in Indiana. Fair Oaks farm is a tourist attraction in a small town showing the general public, from city backgrounds how their food is raised. I saw how interactive exhibits like their “Dairy Adventure” help bridge the gap between producers and the public. A little closer to home, the newer Food + Farm Exploration Center in Plover, Wisconsin, offers hands-on activities to see how food gets from farm to table. These two

businesses both offer a unique opportunity to educate the public. Rural towns are the perfect space to host these agritourism attractions due to having land, as well as farms already located there. Whether it's festivals, farm tours, or a big educational center, agritourism can support local farmers, boost sales for small businesses, and show the pride of Wisconsin agriculture. According to UW–Extension, agritourism contributes more than \$50 million annually to Wisconsin's economy. Investing in this sector is not just about tourism and improving our economy though, it is about keeping Wisconsin agriculture traditions alive, and sharing them with citizens across Wisconsin and the United States.

Prioritizing waste reduction, promoting green energy, and growing local food economies and agritourism work nicely together to improve the environment and the quality of life for residents, all while boosting the economy. Even with limited budgets, towns can take small steps to offer incentives and grants to encourage local businesses to implement programs like these. Growing up in the Town of Beaver Dam has taught me the value of community, conservation, and innovation. By focusing on these agricultural solutions, rural governments will ensure success for towns moving forward.

Works Cited

- Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese. *Our Farm*. Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese, <https://www.cravecheese.com/our-farm>. Accessed 22 May 2025.
- Fair Oaks Farms. *Learn About Us*. Fair Oaks Farms, <https://fofarms.com/about-us/>. Accessed 22 May 2025.
- Food + Farm Exploration Center. *Visit. Play. Explore*. Farming for the Future Foundation, <https://explorefoodandfarm.org/>. Accessed 22 May 2025.
- United States Department of Agriculture. *Anaerobic Digester*. Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2022, https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/filesAnaerobicDigester_2024.pdf. Accessed 22 May 2025.
- University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension. *Agritourism in Wisconsin*. UW Extension, 2023, <https://extension.wisc.edu>. Accessed 22 May 2025.
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. *Recycling and Waste Reduction*. Wisconsin DNR, 2020, <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/Recycling>. Accessed 22 May 2025.