STAFFORD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

STAFFORD FIRST. STAFFORD FORWARD.

An Economic Development Initiative for the Next Generation

Rooted Here. Building What's Next.

A framework that puts Stafford first by strengthening the people, businesses, places and character already here - then moves Stafford forward through infrastructure, opportunity, collaboration and the next generation.

Framework for Discussion & Community Input



FOUNDATION | THE MISSION THAT GUIDES THE FRAMEWORK

The Mission Is the North Star

Stafford First. Stafford Forward. is not intended to replace the Economic Development Commission's mission. It is a practical framework for carrying that mission into measurable action.

MISSION STATEMENT

To grow and to enhance the economic well-being of the community through the promotion of viable businesses of all sizes, new and existing. To conduct research into economic conditions and trends in the town. To advocate for and balance the needs of the residents and business owners, and to work towards environmental sustainability and the quality of life.

HOW THE FRAMEWORK PUTS THE MISSION TO WORK

ECONOMIC WELL-BEING	Business retention, entrepreneurship, agriculture, redevelopment, tourism and investment.
RESEARCH	Business surveys, youth listening, feasibility work, property information and an economic dashboard.
BALANCE	Residents, business owners, youth, farmers, municipal partners and regional voices at the same table.
SUSTAINABILITY	Adaptive reuse, local food, infrastructure stewardship and economically durable projects.
QUALITY OF LIFE	Places, recreation, wellness, opportunity and reasons for the next generation to build a future here.

The mission defines why. The framework organizes how.

1. Stafford's Economic Development Framework

The Stafford Economic Development Commission should use a framework that is simple enough to guide decisions, broad enough to connect municipal partners, and disciplined enough to produce measurable action. Stafford does not need to imitate another community. It should strengthen what is uniquely Stafford while connecting those assets to the regional economy.

> **"Stafford was once successful because it was connected to the economy of its time. Our job is to connect Stafford to the economy of ours."**

VISION

Stafford will be a connected, economically resilient community where people can build businesses, careers, families and futures while preserving the character that makes Stafford distinct.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE: NEIGHBORS FIRST

Economic development should strengthen the people already invested in Stafford, invite the next generation into the work, and build practical partnerships with neighboring communities when working together creates greater opportunity than working alone.

THE CATALYST: ENGAGE OUR YOUTH

The Youth Representative should be treated as the opening move of Stafford Forward. It creates a direct connection between Stafford's young people and the Stafford Economic Development Commission and begins a pipeline of residents who understand their community, believe their ideas matter and can help shape its future.

THE REGIONAL PRINCIPLE: STRONG TOWNS BUILD STRONG REGIONS

As the Town of Stafford, through the leadership of the Board of Selectmen, explores and expands shared-service relationships with other communities, the Stafford Economic Development Commission should build on that direction economically: sharing information, coordinating opportunities, strengthening infrastructure connections, supporting regional workforce pipelines and approaching major challenges at the scale where they can actually be solved.

01 CONNECT STAFFORD	02 GROW STAFFORD
Infrastructure	Business
03 BUILD STAFFORD	**04 RAISE STAFFORD**
Places	Youth + Workforce
05 EXPERIENCE STAFFORD	**06 INVEST IN STAFFORD**
Identity + Tourism	Execution + Investment

CROSS-CUTTING STRATEGY: REGIONAL COLLABORATION
Every pillar should ask where Stafford can gain scale, expertise, funding, workforce or market reach by working with neighboring communities and regional partners.



2. Youth as the Catalyst for Stafford's Future

Economic development is ultimately about who will live, work, create businesses, buy homes, raise families and invest in Stafford in the decades ahead. Stafford's youth are therefore not separate from economic development; they are central stakeholders in it.

The proposed Youth Representative would serve as a non-voting advisory representative to the Stafford Economic Development Commission, attend regular meetings, participate in discussions, identify ideas for making Stafford a place where young people can envision a future, and bring perspectives on employment, entrepreneurship, recreation, education, technology, downtown development and community life.

ONE SEAT Youth Representative	ONE BRIDGE School + Town + Business	ONE PIPELINE Skills + Leadership	LONG-TERM RETURN Stay + Return + Build

FROM REPRESENTATION TO OWNERSHIP

• Seat the Youth Representative and give the position meaningful participation in Stafford Economic Development Commission work.

• Use youth listening sessions and surveys to establish what young residents value and what would make Stafford more attractive as a place to live and work.

• Connect students with local and regional employers, trades, colleges, entrepreneurs and municipal leaders.

• Develop internships, job shadowing, mentorship and project-based opportunities.

• Invite the Youth Representative to help identify one visible annual project and present an annual Youth Economic Outlook.

• Create continuity by involving former representatives as mentors and building a long-term youth leadership pipeline.

WHY THIS IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Young people are residents of Stafford now. Their participation gives the Town a perspective that can reveal different obstacles, technologies, gathering places, businesses and community needs. More importantly, it turns civic engagement into practical exposure: ideas become conversations, conversations become plans and plans become action. The objective is not merely to teach government; it is to build attachment, capability and a reason to invest in Stafford later in life.

3. From Youth Voice to *Youth Work*

ENGAGING TODAY. BUILDING TOMORROW.

Stafford's young people are not just the future of our community, they are a vital part of it today. Economic development is stronger when young people have a seat at the table and real opportunities to gain skills, work, and contribute right here at home.

Through the Youth Representative on the Stafford Economic Development Commission and the Stafford Teen Workforce, we can create a pathway from ideas to opportunity — connecting youth voice with real-world experience, local businesses, and a stronger future for Stafford.

> *"Investing in our young people isn't just the right thing to do, it's smart economic development."*
> — STAFFORD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION



YOUTH VOICE
Ideas, perspective and a seat at the table.

→

FIRST WORK
Real experience in real life.

→

SKILLS
Confidence, independence and growth.

→

OPPORTUNITY
Connecting youth with local businesses and residents.

→

STRONGER STAFFORD
Today and for the next generation.

Stafford Teen Workforce *Online* DIRECTORY

We build community and promote economic growth by connecting young people who provide services to the Stafford Springs residents who need them.

Go to:
www.facebook.com/ourprofilepage

PRESENTED BY:
STAFFORD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

DATE:
SEPTEMBER 2026

A LOCAL SOLUTION WITH LASTING IMPACT

The Stafford Teen Workforce is a community-driven initiative that connects local teens with residents in need of services — from lawn care and snow shoveling to babysitting, tutoring, photography, handy-person tasks and more.

This program builds work ethic, life skills and entrepreneurship while meeting real needs in our community. It also helps keep dollars local and strengthens the connection between generations.

This initiative was the idea of **Karen Bentley.**

We are grateful for her vision, leadership and commitment to Stafford's young people and our community.

SERVICES INCLUDE

- Lawn and yardwork
- Snow shoveling or plowing
- Handy-person tasks
- Household chores
- Babysitting and childcare
- Moving things
- Cleanouts and haul-aways
- Photography, videos and editing
- Technical support and problem-solving
- Custom art work of home, pets, people
- Tutoring
- Fitness or sport coaching
- Woodworking

"Strong communities give young people a reason to stay. Great communities give them a reason to return."

3. Six Strategic Pillars

01 CONNECT STAFFORD

Roads, Bridges & Infrastructure

Use roads, bridges, utilities, broadband, walkability and gateways as economic-development tools. Coordinate Stafford Economic Development Commission priorities with Public Works, capital planning and regional transportation partners. Identify projects that unlock private investment and improve connections to neighboring employment and commercial centers.

02 GROW STAFFORD

Existing Businesses First

Retain and expand Stafford businesses before recruitment. Launch business roundtables and a business survey; create a clear opening/expansion pathway; maintain a property inventory; and connect businesses with municipal, regional and state resources.

03 BUILD STAFFORD

Places Worth Investing In

Turn underused buildings, village centers and public assets into economic value. Identify priority redevelopment sites, encourage adaptive reuse and mixed-use opportunities, and use assets such as the Witt School discussion to model productive reuse.

04 RAISE STAFFORD

Youth, Workforce & Education

Make youth engagement the connective pillar. Build the Youth Representative into internships, job shadows, trades exposure, entrepreneurship, employer connections and regional education/workforce partnerships.

05 EXPERIENCE STAFFORD

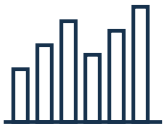
Tourism, Recreation & Identity

Compete on Stafford's authentic strengths - villages, history, agriculture, recreation, architecture, local businesses and events - while linking Stafford into regional visitor itineraries and destination marketing.

06 INVEST IN STAFFORD

Execution, Data & Investment Readiness

Create an investor/developer packet, economic dashboard and clear project ownership. Present Stafford as both a distinct community and an accessible part of a larger labor market, supply chain, visitor economy and investment region.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY | EXISTING BUSINESSES FIRST

Keep the Businesses That Make Stafford, Stafford

Recruitment matters, but a resilient local economy begins by understanding why existing businesses stay, why they struggle and why some leave. Stafford First means treating business retention as an economic-development priority - then using what we learn to make Stafford Forward stronger.

THE STAFFORD FIRST QUESTION

Are we making it easier for good businesses to stay - not just easier for new businesses to arrive?

LISTEN FOR THE BARRIERS

COMMERCIAL COSTS

Rent, utilities, insurance, financing and the cost of occupying or improving space.

FOOT TRAFFIC

Walkability, nearby activity, complementary businesses, events and reasons to move through downtown.

PROPERTY CONDITIONS

Vacancy, deferred maintenance, redevelopment barriers and productive reuse of underused buildings.

VISIBILITY

Accurate directories, digital discoverability, signage, storytelling and connections to customers.

MUNICIPAL PROCESS

Clear contacts, permitting pathways, zoning coordination and practical navigation of available resources.

OWNERSHIP + CAPITAL

Explore realistic ways to help entrepreneurs build equity, access capital and deepen long-term investment.

TURN INDIVIDUAL STORIES INTO ECONOMIC INTELLIGENCE

One closure can reveal a problem, but it should not determine policy by itself. The EDC should use business roundtables, surveys and direct outreach to identify recurring patterns, distinguish what the Town can influence from what it cannot, and connect those findings to Planning & Zoning, Public Works, property owners, regional partners and state resources.

LISTEN -> MEASURE -> CONNECT -> TEST -> ACT -> REPORT

A RETENTION STRATEGY - NOT A PROMISE TO CONTROL THE MARKET

The EDC cannot set private commercial rents or guarantee that every business survives. Its role is to identify recurring barriers, improve the conditions government and community partners can influence, connect businesses to resources, encourage responsible property investment and make Stafford easier to operate in.

MISSION IN ACTION

Promote viable businesses, new and existing. Research local economic conditions.

Balance the needs of residents and business owners. Strengthen quality of life.

STAFFORD ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

Our History.
Our Community.
Our Next Chapter.



PEOPLE
PLACES
POTENTIAL

The Witt School: *A Defining Opportunity*

PRESERVE OUR PAST | INVEST IN OUR FUTURE

A KEY PIECE OF STAFFORD'S ECONOMIC FUTURE

The future of the Witt School is one of the most important economic development opportunities facing Stafford. As a prominent property with deep community history, the Witt School has the potential to become a long-term economic, educational and civic asset for our town.

There are currently a few bids out on the school, but nothing has been set. The Stafford Economic Development Commission (EDC) recommends continuing to explore as many options as possible to ensure the best long-term outcome for Stafford's economic success and sustainability.

This is a generational opportunity — and taking the time to do our due diligence, engage the community, and evaluate a wide range of possibilities will be key to maximizing its value for current and future residents.

POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES

The Witt School could support a wide range of possibilities, including:

- Educational Programming *(Workforce, Trades, Adult Ed)*
- Mixed-Use Redevelopment *(Housing + Commercial)*
- Youth & Community Center
- Innovation & Technology Hub
- Business Incubator & Co-Working Space
- Arts, Culture & Event Space
- Recreation, Wellness & Community Use
- Sustainable Redevelopment

"Thoughtful reuse of underutilized school buildings has helped many small towns reimagine their future."

LESSONS FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES

Across New England and beyond, similar school properties have played a major role in shaping the long-term success of small towns.

WHERE IT HAS SUCCEEDED



Brattleboro, Vermont – Latchis Arts & Community Center
The former high school was transformed into a vibrant arts, cultural and economic hub, including a theater, event space, restaurants and offices, becoming a major driver of downtown revitalization.[1]

Biddeford, Maine – Historic High School Redevelopment
A once-vacant high school was redeveloped into housing, commercial space and community facilities, helping to spark broader downtown investment and economic growth.[2]

WHERE IT HAS STRUGGLED



Franklin, New Hampshire – Franklin High School
After years of uncertainty and limited community alignment, the former high school remained vacant for an extended period, leading to ongoing maintenance costs, missed economic opportunities and community frustration.[3]

Pawtucket, Rhode Island – Slater School
Lack of a clear long-term plan and prolonged delays resulted in deterioration, safety concerns and lost opportunities for revitalization in the surrounding area.[4]

STAFFORD FORWARD
PEOPLE • PLACES • OPPORTUNITY

Smart Decisions Today.
A Stronger Stafford Tomorrow.

"Buildings don't create thriving towns — people do.
But the right spaces can give people the opportunity to build what's next."

Sources: 1) Latchis Arts, Brattleboro, VT – latchisarts.org 2) City of Biddeford, ME – biddefordmaine.org 3) Franklin, NH – Union Leader, "Franklin High School future remains uncertain," 2020 4) Pawtucket, RI – Providence Journal, "Slater School plan stalls," 2019

Health & Wellness: Reclaiming a Stafford Economic Identity

Stafford does not need to invent a wellness story. It already has one.

A HISTORY BUILT AROUND HEALTH

Stafford's mineral springs were part of the town's identity long before modern wellness tourism. Local historical material records that the Nipmuck knew the spring for its energizing and healing qualities; by the mid-1700s visitors were traveling to Stafford to drink and bathe in the waters. In 1802, Dr. Samuel Willard built the Springs House specifically for spa visitors. Connecticut History likewise describes Stafford as a resort town whose mineral waters drew visitors including John Adams. Later, Julius Converse's Mineral Springs Manufacturing Company bottled the water, tying wellness, tourism and enterprise together. [1][2]

MID-1700s	Mineral springs gain a regional reputation; visitors come to Stafford.
1767	A direct stage route from Boston to Stafford Springs is established to capitalize on the resort's popularity.
1802	The Springs House is built to accommodate visitors seeking the mineral waters.
1800s	Stafford sits on a major turnpike corridor linking Hartford through Stafford and Worcester toward Boston; historic accounts also document travel over the Stafford turnpike toward New York.
1880s-1900s	Mineral-water bottling turns the springs from an attraction into a commercial product.

THE MARKET HAS COME BACK TO STAFFORD'S HISTORY

The opportunity is not nostalgia. It is market alignment. The Global Wellness Institute reports that the U.S. wellness economy reached $2.1 trillion, while the global wellness economy reached $6.8 trillion in 2024. Wellness tourism spending reached nearly $894 billion globally in 2024, with North America accounting for about $347 billion. Wellness real estate and mental wellness are among the fastest-growing wellness sectors. [3][4][5]

HERITAGE	Interpret the mineral springs, historic resort era, bottling history and transportation story.
OUTDOORS	Connect trails, forests, lakes, walking, cycling, equestrian activity and recreation.
WELLNESS	Explore retreats, fitness, recovery, preventive wellness, healthy food, spa concepts and wellness-oriented lodging.
PLACEMAKING	Link Main Street, historic assets and future redevelopment - including Witt School possibilities - into a coherent visitor experience.
ENTREPRENEURSHIP	Create room for local businesses in food, fitness, recreation, hospitality, events, wellness services and products.

Economic recommendation: commission a focused feasibility and branding study around a Stafford health, wellness, outdoor recreation and heritage economy. The purpose would be to test demand, identify realistic private-sector opportunities and determine which existing assets can be connected before committing public resources.

From the Old Road to the Digital Road

For generations, Stafford benefited from being on the way. Historical sources show that its mineral springs generated travel, a direct Boston stage route was created in 1767, and the Stafford/Worcester turnpike became part of an important Hartford-to-Boston corridor. A nineteenth-century Worcester history even records travel through Stafford Springs over the old Stafford turnpike to New York. Later transportation networks changed those patterns. Stafford's own planning material notes that today's town sits near - rather than directly on - the Interstate 84 corridor. [1][6][7][8]

The old advantage was: people passed through Stafford.
The new opportunity is: give people a reason to seek Stafford out.

A DESTINATION STRATEGY FOR CONNECTICUT

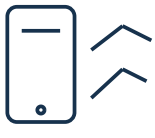
- Tell one story: Stafford Springs' mineral-water and resort history becomes the historical spine connecting wellness, outdoor recreation, heritage, food, arts and small business.
- Create reasons to stay: package trails, historic sites, events, farms, equestrian assets, downtown businesses and future lodging/wellness concepts into half-day, full-day and weekend itineraries.
- Use America 250 as a launch window: 2026 is the nation's 250th anniversary. Federal commemorative efforts explicitly encourage communities and institutions to use the milestone to engage Americans with history. Stafford can use the moment to ask what parts of its own American story can become economic assets for the next generation. [9]
- Think regionally: market Stafford as part of a broader northeastern Connecticut / south-central Massachusetts experience while giving visitors a distinctive reason to choose Stafford as the anchor.
- Make discovery part of the brand: Stafford may no longer sit on the primary highway path. That can become an asset - a place worth leaving the highway to find.

OUR DIGITAL FRONT DOOR IS ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

A community's online presence cannot replace roads, workforce, sites, utilities or relationships. But it increasingly shapes the first impression through which visitors, entrepreneurs and site-selection professionals discover a place. The International Economic Development Council teaches that relocating and expanding businesses need accurate, current and credible community information and specifically includes social media and web technology in economic-development marketing. IEDC guidance from site selectors also stresses that economic-development websites should provide community-specific data. Site Selection magazine has warned that social media works when it is strategic and credible - not random, inconsistent or a substitute for relationship-building. [10][11][12]

DISCIPLINE	Official and civic-facing channels should be accurate, current, constructive and visually consistent.
SIGNAL	Show projects moving forward, businesses succeeding, youth participating, infrastructure improving and community assets being used.
SEARCHABILITY	Make it easy to find properties, contacts, events, trails, history, business resources and investment information.
AUTHENTICITY	Do not manufacture perfection. Present a community that can discuss challenges seriously and still move forward together.
RELATIONSHIPS	Use digital platforms to open doors; follow through with human contact, tours, meetings and regional partnerships.

The Stafford Economic Development Commission's role: help establish a disciplined economic-development narrative that residents, businesses, Town leadership and regional partners can reinforce. The objective is not to police community speech; it is to ensure Stafford's official economic story is credible, useful and worthy of the opportunities the Town wants to attract.



How We Present Stafford Matters

Economic development can begin before a prospective business owner ever enters Town Hall.

Entrepreneurs, investors, visitors and potential residents can research Stafford from anywhere. Our municipal websites, economic-development information, social-media channels, local business presence, news coverage and public-facing conversations collectively contribute to the first impression of the community. Economic-development and site-selection guidance emphasizes accurate, current, credible and community-specific information when businesses evaluate locations. [1][2]

DIGITAL DISCIPLINE IS NOT DIGITAL PERFECTION

This recommendation is not about suppressing disagreement, policing residents' speech or manufacturing an artificial image of Stafford. A healthy community should be able to disagree. The opportunity is to become more disciplined in the spaces the Town and its economic-development partners can influence: communicate accurately, respond constructively, celebrate progress, highlight local businesses and opportunities, and remember that public digital content can be seen far beyond Stafford.

ACCURACY	Keep official economic, property, project and business information current and easy to verify.
CONSTRUCTIVE TONE	Show that Stafford can address challenges seriously without allowing every public conversation to become a signal of dysfunction.
VISIBLE PROGRESS	Regularly show infrastructure work, youth participation, farms, businesses, redevelopment, events and regional partnerships moving forward.
SEARCHABILITY	Make Stafford's sites, contacts, incentives, properties, history, tourism assets and business resources easy to discover online.
CONSISTENCY	Use recognizable language and visual standards so Stafford's economic story reinforces itself across platforms.
HUMAN FOLLOW-THROUGH	Use digital platforms to create interest, then convert that interest into calls, tours, meetings, visits and relationships.

USE TECHNOLOGY TO LEAD PEOPLE BACK INTO STAFFORD

The strongest digital strategy ends in the physical community. A post should help someone discover a Stafford farm. A short video should make someone want to visit Main Street, attend Farm Day, explore Stafford's mineral-springs history or walk a trail. A development page should make an entrepreneur request a property tour. A youth story should show a future resident that Stafford invests in its next generation. Social media becomes useful when it moves people from a screen into Stafford's businesses, places, events and relationships.

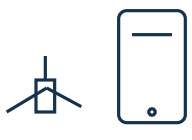
Economic-development recommendation: Treat Stafford's digital presence as supporting infrastructure. Establish a simple Stafford Economic Development Commission communications standard and a regularly updated digital economic-development hub, while coordinating with Town leadership and community partners so accurate information and positive momentum are easy to find.

MEASURE IT

Add digital readiness to the Stafford Economic Development Commission dashboard: freshness of business/property information; website referrals and inquiries; reach of economic-development content; businesses and farms featured; visitor/event referrals; and qualified investment or business inquiries generated through digital channels.

Sources

[1] International Economic Development Council, *Economic Development Marketing and Attraction*: relocating and expanding businesses require accurate, current and credible information; course content includes web and social-media technology. [2] International Economic Development Council, site-selector guidance: economic-development websites should provide community- and region-specific data. The framework treats social media as one part of broader online due diligence and community presentation, not as a substitute for fundamentals or direct relationships.



Source Notes

[1] Explore Stafford / Stafford Historical Society Museum, Mineral Springs history: the Nipmuck association, resort visitors, 1767 Boston stage route, 1802 Springs House, and bottling history. explorestaffordct.com/hsm

[2] Connecticut History (CT Humanities), Stafford: mineral springs drew Indigenous peoples and settlers; Stafford became a resort town and attracted visitors including John Adams. connecticuthistory.org/towns-page/stafford/

[3] Global Wellness Institute, U.S. Wellness Economy (Apr. 2, 2026): U.S. wellness economy valued at $2.1 trillion. globalwellnessinstitute.org/press-room/press-releases/us-wellness-economy-surges-to-2-1-trillion-cementing-global-leadership/

[4] Global Wellness Institute, 2025 Global Wellness Economy Monitor / Statistics: global wellness economy reached $6.8 trillion in 2024; wellness real estate and mental wellness were among the fastest-growing sectors. globalwellnessinstitute.org/press-room/statistics-and-facts/

[5] Global Wellness Institute, Wellness Tourism: 2024 global wellness-tourism expenditures reached $893.9 billion; North America $346.9 billion. globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/what-is-wellness-tourism/

[6] Explore Stafford, Local Development / Our History: by the mid-1800s the railroad connected Stafford to markets across New England; earlier turnpike and trolley connections shaped access. explorestaffordct.com/community

[7] Frederic J. Wood, The Turnpikes of New England (1919), and related historical accounts of the Worcester and Stafford Turnpike / Hartford-Tolland route as a major Hartford-Boston corridor.

[8] Stafford 2012 Plan of Conservation & Development, Transportation: Stafford is located along the I-84 corridor with nearby entrance/exit points linking New York to the Massachusetts Turnpike. explorestaffordct.com (POCD PDF).

[9] U.S. Government Publishing Office, America's 250th Anniversary (July 2, 2026): 2026 marks 250 years since the Declaration of Independence; national efforts invite broad participation in commemorating American history. govinfo.gov/features/america-250

[10] International Economic Development Council, Economic Development Marketing and Attraction: relocating/expanding businesses need accurate, current, credible information; curriculum includes social media and web technology for economic-development marketing. iedconline.org/events/2022/01/13/training-courses/economic-development-marketing-and-attraction/

[11] International Economic Development Council, 'Site selectors answer questions about the process' (June 12, 2019): EDO websites should contain community/region-specific data and information. iedconline.org (Economic Development Now archive).

[12] Site Selection Magazine, 'Unconventional Wisdom: Social Media': strategic social media can help economic development, but requires audience discipline, consistent management and cannot replace direct relationships. siteselection.com/unconventional-wisdom/

Research note: The transportation history supports describing Stafford as part of important historic travel corridors. The framework intentionally avoids claiming that modern highway construction alone caused Stafford's economic changes; industrial, rail, highway, retail and regional development patterns all evolved over time.

Agriculture: Feeding Stafford's Future

Stafford's agricultural past is not separate from its future. It can become one of the bridges between health, community, tourism, entrepreneurship and the next generation.

AGRICULTURE IS IN STAFFORD'S FOUNDATION

Stafford began in 1719 as a small agricultural community, with its early population concentrated in agricultural villages. That identity remains visible today: Explore Stafford lists more than 30 farms, agricultural businesses and enterprises across the town, while the Stafford Agricultural Advisory Commission notes that some local families still farm land worked by their ancestors. Stafford Farm Day continues that legacy as the town's largest agricultural event, drawing thousands and directing proceeds toward agricultural initiatives. [1][2][3]

SERVING OURSELVES LOCALLY

The Stafford Economic Development Commission should explore how more of what Stafford grows, raises and produces can circulate through Stafford first. This is not a call for isolation or a municipal farming operation. It is an economic-development strategy: create stronger local markets for local producers, make healthy local food easier to find, connect farms to restaurants, schools, events and residents, and keep more spending moving through the local economy. Stafford's 2022 planning work already identified a downtown farmers market, farm-to-table activity, agritainment, local meat-processing synergies and even the possibility of establishing Stafford as an equestrian center as opportunities worth supporting. [4]

LOCAL FOOD	Strengthen farm stands, farmers markets, CSA participation, farm-to-table events and institutional purchasing where feasible.
HEALTH + WELLNESS	Make locally produced food part of Stafford's broader wellness identity: nourishment, outdoor activity, community and prevention.
FARM VIABILITY	Help existing farmers reach customers, diversify revenue, navigate programs and build durable businesses.
TOURISM	Package farms, Farm Day, equestrian assets, maple, berries, flowers, farm stores and seasonal experiences into Stafford destination itineraries.
VALUE-ADDED	Explore shared processing, aggregation, distribution, commercial-kitchen, cold-storage or retail opportunities based on demonstrated farmer demand.

THE FARMERS ARE THE ASSET

Stafford already has a farming community with experienced, innovative and multi-generational producers. Those farmers deserve the opportunity to thrive. The first step in any new agricultural initiative should therefore be listening: ask producers what they need, what they would use, what they would sell through, and what would actually improve farm economics. The Stafford Economic Development Commission can help connect those answers to the Agricultural Advisory Commission, Town leadership, schools, regional partners and state/federal resources.



Exploring a Cooperative Model for Stafford

The previous section begins with the farmers themselves: what would help them become more viable, reach more customers and keep more economic activity circulating locally? A cooperative is **one possible tool** for answering that question - not a predetermined outcome. Stafford Forward should explore the model only if local producers, residents and market demand demonstrate that it solves a real problem.

The idea is not: *Stafford needs a co-op.*
The question is: Could cooperative ownership or shared infrastructure help Stafford's existing assets work better together?

WHY IT IS WORTH EXPLORING

Stafford has both agricultural depth and cooperative history. That history is useful as context, but it should not dictate the future. A modern model could take many forms: producer marketing, a community farm store, aggregation and distribution, shared equipment or services, an online marketplace, or a learning hub connecting experienced farmers with young people. The structure should follow the need - not the other way around.

WHAT OTHER COMMUNITIES SHOW

Traverse City, Michigan	**Commongrounds Cooperative** developed a four-story, community-owned mixed-use project connecting local businesses, nonprofits, workforce needs, cultural activity and wellness. USDA Rural Development presents it as a community economic-development success story. [A]
Dorchester, Massachusetts	**Dorchester Food Co-op** was developed to combine healthy-food access with local economic development. MassDevelopment reports that it grew beyond 2,000 member-owners and created full-time jobs for community residents. [B]
Greenfield, Massachusetts	**Real Pickles** converted an established local food company into a worker-owned cooperative rather than selling to an outside buyer. A community investment campaign raised about $500,000, helping preserve local ownership and the company's regional-food mission. [C]

These examples do **not** prove that a cooperative would work in Stafford. They show why the model deserves disciplined exploration: cooperatives can keep ownership local, pool resources that are difficult for small operators to build alone, create community-serving spaces and connect economic activity to a place. USDA research on rural food co-op start-ups likewise emphasizes that success depends on feasibility, management, member commitment and a real market - reinforcing the need to study before deciding. [D]

A STAFFORD PROCESS: LISTEN -> TEST -> PILOT -> DECIDE

1. LISTEN	Ask farmers, producers, residents, restaurants and institutions what problem actually needs solving.
2. TEST	Measure demand, production, seasonality, operating costs, sites, logistics and recurring revenue.
3. PILOT	If evidence supports it, test the smallest useful version - directory, shared purchasing, pickup point, market or another limited collaboration.
4. DECIDE	Only then determine whether a cooperative, nonprofit, private business, public-private partnership or no new entity is the best path.

HOW IT CONNECTS TO STAFFORD FORWARD

If a shared model proves viable, its value would extend beyond agriculture. Local food supports Stafford's wellness identity; farm experiences strengthen tourism; stronger farm businesses create opportunities for youth mentorship and entrepreneurship; digital storytelling helps those products and experiences reach customers; and regional partnerships expand markets without diluting Stafford's identity. **The cooperative idea is therefore a possible connector inside the framework - not the framework's destination.**

Sources

[A] USDA Rural Development, "Finding Common Ground: A Community Economic Development Project" (2023), rd.usda.gov. [B] MassDevelopment, "Dorchester Food Co-op (DFC)," massdevelopment.com. [C] Start.coop / Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture, "Real Pickles: Community Investment in the Local Food System," start.coop. [D] USDA Rural Business-Cooperative Service, *Keys to Success for Food Co-op Start Ups in Rural Areas: Four Case Studies* (2005), govinfo.gov / rd.usda.gov.

Put Young People Back on the Land - and in the Business

The foundation of Stafford Forward is the next generation. Agriculture provides one of the most practical ways to turn that principle into experience. Young people can learn biology, mechanics, land stewardship, animal care, food systems, finance, entrepreneurship, marketing and responsibility in the same environment. The goal is not to tell every student to become a farmer. It is to make agriculture visible as a legitimate modern career, business and community pathway.

A STAFFORD AGRICULTURAL MENTORSHIP PIPELINE

1 | LISTEN	Youth Representative helps survey student interest in farming, food, trades, conservation and agribusiness.
2 | MATCH	Participating Stafford farmers volunteer for job shadows, farm visits, mentorship or project advising.
3 | LEARN	Students complete hands-on projects: livestock, produce, maple, equipment, marketing, farm events or business plans.
4 | BUILD	Connect eligible youth to 4-H, FFA-style experiences, UConn Extension, USDA resources and small income-producing projects.
5 | LAUNCH	Help interested graduates access beginning-farmer training, mentors, land connections, financing and business assistance.
6 | RETURN	Create a reason for Stafford-raised young people to see farming and food entrepreneurship as a path home.

PROVEN PROGRAMS TO BUILD FROM

4-H: USDA describes 4-H as its national youth-development program, serving millions through hands-on projects including livestock and gardening. Its model emphasizes progressive learning, leadership and using acquired skills to improve families and communities. [8]

USDA Youth Loans: the Farm Service Agency offers agricultural youth loans to ages 10-20 participating in approved youth organizations. Projects are designed to generate income and provide hands-on experience in agriculture and business management, with an adult project advisor supporting the young producer. [9]

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development: USDA's NIFA program funds collaborative local and regional partnerships that provide education, outreach and technical assistance to beginning farmers. USDA notes that more than one-third of America's 3.4 million farmers are over 65, making development of a new generation essential to continued agricultural production. [10]

The Youth Representative can be the catalyst that connects Stafford's students to Stafford's farmers.

FIRST ACTIONS FOR THE STAFFORD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

- Convene a joint agriculture economic roundtable with the Stafford Agricultural Advisory Commission and local farmers.
- Ask farmers what would materially improve profitability before designing any co-op or shared facility.
- Create a voluntary farmer/youth mentor roster with Stafford Public Schools and youth organizations.
- Explore a pilot 'Stafford Grown' directory or brand connecting local food, health, tourism and farm experiences.
- Evaluate a modern cooperative/community farm-store concept through a formal feasibility study.
- Pursue regional and USDA partnerships so Stafford farmers and young producers can access expertise and capital without the Town duplicating existing programs.

Agriculture & Youth Source Notes

[1] Explore Stafford, Farms + Markets: Stafford originated as a small agricultural community and today has 30+ agricultural businesses and operations. https://www.explorestaffordct.com/agriculture

[2] Stafford Agricultural Advisory Commission, About: farming history dates to the mid-1700s; some families continue to farm ancestral land; commission promotes large and micro farms and supports agricultural projects and scholarships. https://staffordagct.wixsite.com/mysite/about

[3] Explore Stafford, Stafford Farm Day: 300+ years of agricultural history; Farm Day is Stafford's largest agricultural event and proceeds support local agriculture, including possible community farm-store goals. https://www.explorestaffordct.com/farmday

[4] Town of Stafford, 2022 Plan of Conservation & Development draft, Agriculture: 30+ farms; downtown farmers-market opportunity; farm-to-table, agritainment, meat-processing synergies and equestrian-center potential. Stafford municipal planning materials.

[5] Archival photograph/listing, 'Stafford Co-op Food Store, mid-1980s,' documenting the former co-op storefront later known as Stafford Food Center. Flickr archival image; historical detail should be independently documented before use as an official institutional history.

[6] Connecticut Farm to Table Cooperative listing: collection of small Connecticut farms working together to improve consistency of farm-direct product availability; Stafford Springs address. https://localscale.org/listing/farm.jsp?uid=eb5ba7aa-ac57-454a-9cdd-0626875474a5

[7] LocalHarvest, Connecticut Farm to Table Cooperative CSA: Stafford Springs multi-farm, year-round meat CSA; listing reports operation since 2014 and 500 shares. https://www.localharvest.org/connecticut-farm-to-table-cooperative-M60510/csa

[8] USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 4-H: USDA's Youth Development Program; hands-on learning, leadership and projects including livestock and gardening. https://www.nifa.usda.gov/4-h

[9] USDA Farm Service Agency, Youth Loans: ages 10-20 in approved agricultural youth organizations may finance income-producing agricultural projects with project-advisor support; loans up to $10,000. https://www.fsa.usda.gov/resources/loans/youth-loans

[10] USDA NIFA, Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program: education, outreach and technical assistance for beginning farmers; more than one-third of 3.4 million U.S. farmers are over age 65. https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/beginning-farmer-rancher-development-program-bfrdp

4. Regional Collaboration: Stafford's Force Multiplier

Municipal boundaries matter for governance, but economies routinely cross them. Workers commute across town lines. Customers shop across town lines. Roads, broadband, housing, tourism, supply chains and workforce systems cross town lines. Stafford should therefore protect its identity while deliberately participating in a larger economic network.

A REGIONAL AGENDA FOR THE STAFFORD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

• Build regular relationships with economic-development leaders and commissions in neighboring Connecticut and Massachusetts communities.

• Coordinate with the Board of Selectmen so economic collaboration complements the Town's emerging shared-service strategy rather than operating separately from it.

• Identify opportunities for shared grant applications, technical expertise, purchasing, data, infrastructure planning and business assistance.

• Map regional workforce assets: high schools, technical education, community colleges, UConn, employers and training providers.

• Develop cross-community tourism and recreation itineraries rather than treating every town as an isolated destination.

• Share leads when a project is not a fit for Stafford but could strengthen the surrounding economy - and build relationships that encourage reciprocal referrals.

• Use regional organizations and state partners to pursue projects too large for one small town to carry alone.

CONNECTICUT ALREADY USES THIS MODEL

The Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) is a 38-municipality regional organization whose member leaders explicitly recognize that the future of individual towns is tied to the future of the region. Its current strategy includes regional business recruitment and retention, workforce development, infrastructure coordination and shared municipal services designed to capture economies of scale and improve service quality. Its economic-development work also emphasizes talent, quality of place and collaboration around regional industry strengths. [1][2]

For Stafford, the lesson is not to surrender local decision-making. It is to use regional relationships as leverage: Stafford can remain Stafford while gaining access to a larger workforce, stronger grant partnerships, better data, broader visitor markets and shared expertise.



5. Case Studies: When Regions Compete Together

Regional collaboration does not, by itself, prove causation for an economic boom. But strong U.S. growth regions repeatedly use formal cross-jurisdictional partnerships to market themselves, coordinate infrastructure and talent, build industry clusters and pursue investment at a scale individual municipalities cannot match.

RESEARCH TRIANGLE, NORTH CAROLINA

The Research Triangle Regional Partnership represents a multi-county region and explicitly serves as the connector between companies, local economic-development offices, government agencies and business organizations. The region describes itself as a culture of collaboration and now reports more than 2.4 million residents and a workforce exceeding one million. Recent investment announcements illustrate the scale of the regional cluster: Novo Nordisk announced a $4.1 billion Clayton expansion with 1,000 jobs; FUJIFILM's Holly Springs investments total $3.2 billion and more than 1,400 jobs across two announcements. These projects cannot be attributed to regional partnership alone, but they show what a coordinated talent, infrastructure, education and business ecosystem can support. [3][4][5]

GREATER MINNEAPOLIS-SAINT PAUL

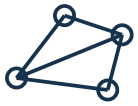
GREATER MSP brings together more than 300 businesses, universities, cities, counties and philanthropic organizations across a 15-county economy. Its model is deliberately regional: partners coordinate business investment, talent attraction, startups, transportation connectivity and industry initiatives. The organization tracks outcomes against peer regions and reports strong performance indicators including high workforce participation, business survivability and millennial migration. The lesson for Stafford is organizational: neighboring communities can retain their identities while marketing and solving problems as one economic region. [6][7]

GREATER CHATTANOOGA TRI-STATE REGION

Thrive Regional Partnership grew from a citizen-led regional planning effort spanning communities in Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama. Thousands of residents participated in building a shared long-term action plan; the effort later produced a 16-county regional partnership, a regional economic-development partnership, a broadband alliance, transportation collaboration and shared data infrastructure. The Greater Chattanooga Economic Partnership now markets the 16-county region jointly for business expansion and relocation. This is especially relevant to Stafford because it demonstrates collaboration across not only municipal but state boundaries while preserving local community character. [8][9]

U.S. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

The federal EDA's research on regional economic connectivity states that urban and rural communities perform better and boost one another's economies when they participate in their regional economies. EDA has also structured major investment programs around regional coalitions; its Build Back Better Regional Challenge awarded 21 coalitions $25 million to $65 million each for interconnected projects, backed by more than $300 million in local matching investment and hundreds of private-sector partners. [10][11]



6. From Catalyst to Action: 2026-2028

Priority	Stafford Economic Development Commission First Move	Result
Youth	Authorize, recruit and seat Youth Representative	Youth voice becomes part of economic planning
Business	Business survey + recurring roundtable	Direct pipeline of barriers and opportunities
Infrastructure	Public Works economic briefing	Connect capital projects to investment potential
Regional	Regional partner roundtable	Identify shared services, grants, workforce and projects
Planning	EDC / Planning & Zoning coordination	Align development vision and regulation
Assets	Witt School / priority-site strategy	Define productive reuse opportunities
Investment	Commercial property + investor inventory	Make Stafford easier to understand and invest in
Identity	Stafford + regional tourism strategy	Increase reach without losing local identity
Accountability	Annual economic dashboard	Publicly measure progress

MEASURING PROGRESS

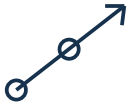
A focused dashboard should track business openings and closures, commercial vacancy, grand-list growth, building permits, housing creation, infrastructure investment, business engagement, youth participation, internships and job shadows, outside grant dollars, private investment leveraged, and regional projects or grants pursued jointly.

THE TEST

Does this make Stafford a better place for the next generation to build a future - and does working together give Stafford greater reach than working alone?

ROLE OF THE STAFFORD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

The Stafford Economic Development Commission does not need to own every project. Its highest-value role is to convene, connect, catalyze, communicate and measure: bring businesses, residents, youth, schools, municipal boards, neighboring communities and regional partners to the same table; identify opportunity; turn ideas into defined initiatives; and keep Stafford focused on a coherent long-term direction.



7. References & Source Material

Stafford source material

Stafford Economic Development Commission. Proposal to Establish a Youth Representative to the Economic Development Commission. August 31, 2026.

Regional collaboration sources

[1] Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG), Mission and Strategic Goals. https://crcogct.org/about/strategic-playbook/

[2] CRCOG, Economic Development. https://crcogct.org/regional-planning-and-development/economic-development/

[3] Research Triangle Regional Partnership, About Us / Regional Overview. https://researchtriangle.org/about-us/ ; https://researchtriangle.org/

[4] Research Triangle Regional Partnership, Novo Nordisk to Invest $4.1 Billion at Clayton Campus, Create 1,000 Jobs, June 26, 2024. https://researchtriangle.org/news/press-release-novo-nordisk-to-invest-4-1-billion-at-its-clayton-campus-create-1000-jobs/

[5] Research Triangle Regional Partnership, FUJIFILM Diosynth Biotechnologies expansion, April 11, 2024. https://researchtriangle.org/news/fujifilm-diosynth-biotechnologies-to-double-holly-springs-biomanufacturing-campus-1-2b-680-new-jobs/

[6] GREATER MSP Partnership, The Partnership. https://www.greatermsp.org/pages/the-partnership/

[7] GREATER MSP Partnership, Regional Insights / What We Do. https://www.greatermsp.org/pages/regional-insights/ ; https://www.greatermsp.org/pages/what-we-do/

[8] Thrive Regional Partnership, About. https://www.thriveregionalpartnership.org/about

[9] Greater Chattanooga Economic Partnership, About GCEP. https://www.greaterchatt.com/about-gcep/

[10] U.S. Economic Development Administration, Research and Evaluation: Developing Regional Economic Connectivity. https://www.eda.gov/resources/reports/research-evaluation

[11] U.S. Economic Development Administration, Build Back Better Regional Challenge. https://www.eda.gov/archives/2022/arpa/build-back-better/

STAFFORD FORWARD

Engage the next generation. Strengthen Stafford's businesses and places. Build regional relationships. Compete together where scale matters. Keep Stafford's identity at the center.