OCTOBER 2025 | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Stafford Advantage

A Playbook for Growth



Prepared for:

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— ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT —
STAFFORD
Virginia



Executive Summary

Stafford County - and its Economic Development Department - are faced with a critical juncture in shaping the county's economic future.

Long a residential hub for employees in Washington DC and broader Northern Virginia, Stafford County is home to a growing, educated population that is relatively young and full of families. The school system is strong. The presence of high-paying jobs is low, but ample opportunity exists within an hour of the county to both the north and south. The county is home to amenities such as grocery stores, sports fields, a waterfront, and other recreational opportunities, creating a primarily suburban lifestyle and built environment that has sustained itself for generations.

However, as nearby suburban counties throughout Northern Virginia have prioritized industry attraction and modern real estate developments, Stafford County has fallen behind.

Key areas of concern include:

- **The county offers limited financial incentives to aid in the development of new commercial amenities**, leading to a primarily outdated building stock of aging strip malls and standalone structures. This outcome results in most local residents dining and shopping elsewhere, with Stafford County losing out on tax revenue.
- **Industry specialization in high-wage professions is also low**, with the county lacking denser job centers that offer attractive employment opportunities. As peer suburban counties such as Loudoun, Fairfax, and Prince William have invested heavily in the policy and infrastructure needed to build employment locally, Stafford has struggled to achieve similar outcomes.
- **The business climate is perceived as lackluster by regional and state partners**, private businesses, and site selectors for companies. Regulatory hurdles, a robust permitting process, and political disagreements related to commercial developments all exacerbate this reality.

With the county facing budget constraints in the coming years, the time is now to align on policies, programs, and actions that will help to increase commercial taxes and balance the county's finances. It will take the leadership of the Economic Development Department and its key partners to chart the path forward and alter these existing conditions. This new Economic Development Strategy serves as the guide to catalyzing this impact.



Plan Overview

In May 2025, Stafford County's Economic Development Department – in partnership with Fourth Economy – began the process of updating its five-year Economic Development Strategy. The county's most recent Economic Development Strategy was published in 2015, making this plan a necessary update to the county's goals, aspirations, and operations. This new plan is the result of robust data analysis, engagement with key county, regional, and state stakeholders, and an iterative process of crafting feasible, implementable recommendations for the county's Economic Development Department.

Core focuses of the plan include increased business attraction, business retention and expansion, entrepreneurial support, workforce development, real estate development, infrastructure development, and more.

In Stafford County, economic development is led by the county government's Economic Development Department. This team - comprising five economic development-focused staff members, four tourism-focused employees, and a marketing contractor - manage a suite of programs and initiatives that aid in business and job attraction, retention, and expansion. Focuses include marketing the county and its advantages to external businesses and site selectors, catalyzing business creation and continuity, and supporting the education and employability of local residents.

The Economic Development Department is complemented by the Stafford County Economic Development Authority (EDA), a separate entity that distributes funding through the county's economic incentives and other financial programs. The EDA - a common governmental structure found throughout Virginia - helps to execute on economic development priorities through the guidance of seven appointed board members.

Economic Development 101

"Economic Development is programs, policies and activities that seek to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community by creating and retaining jobs and providing a stable tax base. Ultimately, economic development is a revenue strategy for a community, generating additional tax dollars from new business investment."

- International Economic Development Counci

Key Findings



Stafford County is Well-Off

The county's socioeconomics and demographics are strong in terms of income, employment, and growth. The county is also relatively young and has a high density of families.



Industry Specialization is Low

The county lacks dense industry activity in high-wage industries, with most employment clustered in lower-wage jobs. Most Stafford County residents that work in the knowledge economy do so elsewhere.



Retail Leakage Hinders the Tax Base

Most local residents do the bulk of their dining and shopping elsewhere. This "retail leakage" means the county misses out on critical sales tax dollars.



The Business Climate is Lacking

The county's business policies and processes are not perceived as business friendly. This reality leads to businesses - and their corresponding jobs and potential tax revenue - choosing to locate elsewhere.



Peer Counties are Out-Competing Stafford

Nearby counties such as Fairfax, Loudoun, Prince William, and Spotsylvania have managed to catalyze economic growth through policies and investments that re-define the suburban experience. Stafford County has failed to do so.



Budget Constraints are Coming

Elected officials are actively concerned about the state of the county's finances and budgeting in the coming years. A boon in commercial tax revenue could help to ease these worries.



A Vision for Growth is Clear

Residents, elected officials, and economic development leaders agree - investment into modern amenities and knowledge-economy commerce is key for the county's future. A coordinated plan is needed to help achieve these impacts in an intentional, effective manner.

Moving Forward

Stafford County's revamped Economic Development strategy focuses on four core areas for action. Through better attracting and supporting commerce, modernizing real estate and infrastructure, improving the local business climate, and investing in a best-in-class Economic Development Department, the county can work to chart its own course to capture external investment, catalyze job growth, and stabilize the tax base. This action-plan - and its accompanying steps for implementation - will help Stafford County achieve the "next level" of economic development, achieving impacts desired by all local residents, elected officials, and regional and state partners. Core pillars of the action plan and their corresponding actions are detailed on the following pages.

Moving Forward

A Playbook for Growth

Stafford County's new Economic Development plan focuses on four core areas:



Industry Support & Development



Real Estate & Infrastructure



Local Business Climate



Organizational Effectiveness

1. Industry Support & Development

Build a more competitive location for the attraction, creation, expansion, and retention of companies.

- Pursue Defense and Cybersecurity, Information Technology, High-End Retail and Restaurants, and Warehousing and Distribution as the county's core target industries.
- Revamp County incentives and financial programs to assist in the attraction, retention, and expansion of target industry companies.
- Update the Department's programming related to entrepreneurial and small business support.
- Convene a workforce development working group on a quarterly basis to ensure collaboration, continuity, and alignment among key partners.

2. Real Estate & Infrastructure

Be a hub for the modern amenities, developments, and infrastructure that residents and businesses alike seek.

- Prioritize the creation of Destination Stafford as a core downtown entertainment hub.
- Attach enhanced incentives for modern development and target industry activity to existing Targeted Development Areas (TDAs).
- Explore the addition of development and redevelopment-related funding programs under the existing EDA.
- Create a Waterfront Development Plan focused on a mix of tourism and commerce along Stafford County's coastline.

3. Local Business Climate

Improve the local business climate to better position the county to capture investment and economic growth.

» Convene a “Doing Business in Stafford” Task Force to jumpstart collective action towards improving the county’s business climate.

» Work with regional and state partners to build their understanding of Stafford’s enhanced business climate and value proposition.

» Host an annual Economic Development Summit in the county.

4. Organizational Effectiveness

Invest in the continued improvement and development of the county’s Economic Development Department.

» Hire a new manager-level staff member that brings experience in retail attraction and real estate development.

» Re-align the department’s organizational chart to better reflect new skills brought on by the ongoing merger with Stafford County’s Tourism Office.

» Upskill newer staff members through industry-standard training programs and certifications.

» Continue to invest in software and subscriptions that make the Department a more data-driven, tech-enabled team.

» Develop a new marketing tagline - and corresponding collateral - that highlights Stafford’s aspirations as a byproduct of this new economic development strategy.

Stafford County needs a revamped, forward-thinking toolkit for economic development success. A new approach can help to increase commercial tax revenues, modernize countywide amenities and infrastructure, and create more local job opportunities for residents who typically commute elsewhere. Now is the time for County Government, the Economic Development Department, and the Economic Development Authority to innovate, implement, and execute.

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