

BEYOND DATA CENTERS

REFOCUSING ON LOCAL BUSINESS INFRASTRUCTURE FOR A MORE SUCCESSFUL FAUQUIER

Dr. Steve Pleickhardt August 30, 2027

For the past several years, much of the discussion about economic development in Northern Virginia has centered on one industry: data centers.

But economic development is much bigger than data centers.

Fauquier County has an opportunity to ask a more fundamental question:

What kind of economy do we want to build for the people who actually live here?

I believe it is time to revisit Fauquier County's commercial strategy and begin an aggressive effort to attract businesses, employers, services, restaurants, retailers and entrepreneurs that improve everyday life while strengthening our tax base.

WE SHOULD NOT HAVE TO LEAVE FAUQUIER TO SPEND OUR MONEY

Every time a Fauquier resident drives into Prince William County, Loudoun County or another neighboring jurisdiction to shop, dine, obtain a service or find entertainment, some portion of that economic activity leaves Fauquier with them.

That should concern us.

We should be asking why more of those dollars cannot remain here.

Fauquier needs a thoughtful examination of what our residents currently leave the county to obtain. Where are the gaps in retail? What restaurants and services are missing? What employers could thrive here? What businesses would residents actually support?

Then we should go after them.

This does not mean turning Fauquier into Fairfax County.

Quite the opposite.

Smart commercial development can help us protect rural Fauquier by concentrating appropriate growth where infrastructure and development already exist.

FAUQUIER ALREADY HAS THE FOUNDATION

We don't have to reinvent economic development.

Fauquier County already has eight Service Districts that function as tax-incentive zones. The county offers qualified businesses tools including BPOL and business-personal-property tax reductions, permit-fee assistance, accelerated business review, technology and tourism grants and other incentives.¹

The county's own economic-development mission includes helping existing companies expand, encouraging new businesses to locate here and developing tourism.²

And Fauquier's FY2026 economic-development program specifically calls for nurturing entrepreneurship and small businesses, supporting economic development in towns and villages, marketing available commercial sites and attracting industries including food and beverage production, advanced manufacturing, government and defense contracting, and IT/cyber.³

Those are excellent tools.

The question is whether we are using them aggressively enough to build the diverse commercial economy Fauquier needs.

SMALL BUSINESS SHOULD REMAIN THE BACKBONE

This is particularly important because approximately **90 percent of Fauquier businesses have fewer than 20 employees**. The county reported 110 new startup firms in calendar year 2024.⁴

Those numbers tell us something important.

Economic development doesn't have to mean finding one enormous corporation willing to build a massive industrial complex.

Sometimes economic development means helping a five-person company become a 15-person company.

It means helping a successful local restaurant open a second location.

It means helping an entrepreneur obtain financing.

It means filling vacant commercial space.

It means creating opportunities for young people to build careers without leaving Fauquier.

And it means recruiting businesses that complement the community rather than overwhelm it.

BUILD COMMERCIAL CENTERS WHERE THEY MAKE SENSE

Fauquier's Service District approach gives us a mechanism for doing exactly that.

Instead of scattering commercial development across rural land, we should examine areas already designated for growth and ask what infrastructure is preventing businesses from locating there.

That means examining:

Transportation. Can customers and employees reach commercial areas conveniently and safely?

Water and sewer. Do designated commercial areas have sufficient utility capacity for the businesses we want to attract?

Broadband and telecommunications. Modern businesses require modern connectivity.

Commercial zoning. Do our ordinances make reasonable projects unnecessarily difficult or expensive?

Permitting. Can a desirable business get from proposal to opening without encountering years of uncertainty?

Available sites. Do we have shovel-ready or near-ready commercial properties that can actually be marketed to prospective employers?

Infrastructure isn't simply roads, pipes and power lines.

Good regulations, predictable approvals and a government that actively recruits businesses are economic infrastructure too.

GO RECRUIT THE BUSINESSES

Economic development cannot be passive.

Fauquier should identify the businesses and industries residents want and actively recruit them.

That could include grocery and retail anchors, restaurants, medical and professional offices, recreation and entertainment, hospitality, food and beverage businesses, advanced manufacturing, technology companies, government contractors and locally owned businesses.

The county already identifies advanced manufacturing, food and beverage production, IT/cyber and government/defense contracting among its targeted industries.³

We should expand upon that philosophy with a simple test:

Does this business create jobs, broaden our tax base, provide something our residents need and fit the character and infrastructure of Fauquier County?

If the answer is yes, we should be competing for it.

MAKE FAUQUIER THE EASIEST PLACE IN THE REGION TO START A SMALL BUSINESS

There is another enormous opportunity: entrepreneurship.

Fauquier already offers business-development assistance, workforce resources and a county microloan program.⁵

Let's build on that.

Imagine a prospective entrepreneur coming to Fauquier County with an idea and encountering a county government whose first response is:

"How can we help you make this work?"

One point of contact.

Clear permitting requirements.

Available-property assistance.

Financing information.

Workforce connections.

Accelerated review when appropriate.

Introductions to local business organizations and resources.

That is how communities develop businesses from within instead of waiting for somebody from outside the county to discover them.

TOURISM IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TOO

Fauquier possesses something many rapidly developing Northern Virginia jurisdictions have already lost: extraordinary rural landscapes, historic communities, farms, wineries, equestrian traditions and small-town character.

Those aren't obstacles to economic development.

They are economic assets.

Tourism brings outside money into Fauquier, supporting restaurants, lodging, farms, wineries, retailers and other businesses while generating meals and sales-tax revenue. Fauquier's Economic Development Department explicitly identifies tourism as one of its principal economic-development responsibilities.²

Preservation and prosperity therefore do not have to be opposing ideas.

Done correctly, one can reinforce the other.

JOBS MATTER

Perhaps the most important measurement of any economic-development project should be the opportunities it creates for people.

We should look beyond the headline dollar value of an investment and ask:

How many permanent jobs will it create?

What do those jobs pay?

How much business will it generate for other Fauquier companies?

Will employees live and shop here?

Will the project strengthen existing commercial centers?

Will it create opportunities for our children and grandchildren?

Those questions should be central to Fauquier's economic-development strategy.

A MORE DIVERSE TAX BASE

There is also a fiscal reason to pursue this strategy.

Residential development creates continuing demands for schools, roads, public safety and other county services. A healthy commercial sector can broaden the tax base supporting those services.

But relying excessively on any single industry creates its own vulnerabilities.

Economic diversity is economic resilience.

Retail.

Restaurants.

Tourism.

Agriculture.

Professional services.

Healthcare.

Advanced manufacturing.

Technology.

Defense contracting.

Entrepreneurship.

Small business.

And, where appropriate and responsibly located, industrial and technology development.

Fauquier doesn't have to choose just one.

BEYOND DATA CENTERS

This isn't about stopping economic development.

It is about **broadening our definition of economic development.**

Fauquier County can preserve the landscapes and communities that make this county special while creating a stronger commercial economy.

We can protect agriculture while supporting entrepreneurs.

We can preserve rural areas while concentrating appropriate commercial development in our Service Districts.

We can recruit employers without industrializing communities.

And we can build a tax base around hundreds and thousands of businesses rather than becoming dependent upon a handful of enormous projects.

The next chapter of Fauquier's economic-development strategy should therefore begin with a simple idea:

Let's build an economy around the people who live here.

Let's make it easier to open a business.

Let's help existing businesses expand.

Let's recruit the stores, restaurants, employers and services our residents want.

Let's invest in the infrastructure necessary to support them.

Let's keep more Fauquier dollars in Fauquier.

And let's make Fauquier County known not simply as another destination for data centers, but as **one of Virginia's best places to live, work, start a business and build a future.**

That is economic development.

That is sustainable growth.

And that is how we move **Beyond Data Centers.**

Sources

1. Fauquier County Department of Economic Development, *Business Incentives*. The county identifies its eight Service Districts as incentive zones and describes tax reductions and other business incentives.
2. Fauquier County Department of Economic Development, *Business Assistance and Tourism Development*. The department identifies existing-business assistance, new-business recruitment and tourism development as core responsibilities.
3. Fauquier County, *FY2026 Economic Development – Key Projects*. The county identifies food and beverage production, IT/cyber, government/defense contracting and advanced manufacturing as target industries and calls for continued entrepreneurship and small-business development.
4. Fauquier County budget/economic-development documentation reports that approximately 90% of county businesses have fewer than 20 employees and that 110 new startup firms were recorded during calendar year 2024.
5. Fauquier County Department of Economic Development, *Grow Your Business*, describing assistance for expanding businesses, microloans and workforce-development resources.