



hickory & rail ventures

“Stoke is the heartbeat of Denton’s startup scene, providing a hub for entrepreneurs near downtown amenities. Embracing and strengthening these anchor institutions will not only attract growth but also ensure that the creative elements at the heart of Denton’s culture will continue to thrive.” - TIP Strategies from Economic Development Strategic Plan

“I find so much value by officing at Stoke. Not only do I get instant access to a community of professionals and entrepreneurs, it allows me to access ideal space for my business without having to manage an office. I am able to have resources that can grow along with my business.”
- Member survey response - January 2024

Proposal

Hickory & Rail Ventures LLC proposes a continuation of our partnership with the City of Denton in which H&RV operates Stoke Coworking to provide support to the entrepreneurs, startups, and freelancers in our community. The partnership provides a solid platform for the city to support entrepreneurs, remote workers, small businesses, and startup companies while helping to build businesses, create jobs, and strengthen the culture and economy of the City of Denton.

Our track record over the last eight years demonstrates our ability to successfully build the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Denton through our programs, events, partnerships, and marketing efforts. Through our partnership H&RV can help the City of Denton meet the goals by executing the strategies and actions laid out in the Economic Development Strategic Plan adopted by Denton City Council in 2021.

Our proposal is for the City to renew our public/private partnership with H&RV in which the City commits to continue its support for Stoke (October 1, 2025 - September 30, 2026). We are requesting \$158,172.00 to support our programming and help the City of Denton meet its Economic Development goals. During that time frame, Stoke will generate a minimum of \$300,000 from membership dues and space rentals.

H&RV would continue to report to the city on similar deliverables and metrics that we have been since December 2017, and H&RV management will provide an annual report and be available to present to EDPB and City Council on an annual basis or as requested.

Programming Support

DESCRIPTION	AMOUNT	NOTES
Events	\$57,505.00	Allows H&RV produce our existing annual events such as: ● FlintConf ○ Annual conference for entrepreneurs, startups, and creatives. ○ Includes the kickoff event First Strike that we host the evening before the conference. ● Spark Creative Mixers ○ Quarterly networking and education event for creative entrepreneurs to connect and learn. ● Global Entrepreneurship Week ○ Host a series of events to celebrate and support entrepreneurship held during Global Entrepreneurship Week.. ○ Support efforts towards GEW North Texas for increased regional awareness.
Programs + Curriculum	\$49,845.00	Supports H&RV to maintain current programming efforts and support the ideation and development of other educational programming, mentorship, and curriculum that are targeted at serving current or aspiring technologists, women, and minority entrepreneurs. Current offerings include: ● Coffee + Convos ○ Monthly small group mentorship with local subject matter experts and veteran entrepreneurs ● Denton Pitch Competition ○ Promote and vet applications, select 15-20 entrepreneurs to provide business and pitch coaching to, and then determine the 10 finalists that will pitch in front of the panel of judges
Marketing + Content	\$19,960.00	Funds would help H&RV create valuable content that works to raise awareness around the entrepreneurship community and the positive

		impact it has on the economy and culture of Denton. Content created would include: ● Graphics ● Video Content ● Blog posts ● Press releases ● Digital downloads + print resources
Ecosystem	\$30,860.00	Funds support our efforts to participate in partner events and initiatives throughout the region with DISD, DMSA, Chamber of Commerce, Greater Denton Arts Council, etc. Our relationships and collaborations with regional and statewide organizations such as TWU CWE, UNT, Her Texas, GEW NTX, and others are supported by this funding. Additionally, the funds aid in our continued efforts to develop and convene the entrepreneur ecosystem through: ● Stoke member events ● Member directory ● Entrepreneurial ecosystem map and that includes resources and companies in our local ecosystem
Total	\$158,170.00	

Economic Development Strategic Plan Goals

Through the public/private partnership with the City of Denton, H&RV can provide support and alleviate the time and energy required by city staff in pursuit of the goals laid out in the new Economic Development Comprehensive Strategic Plan. Stoke programs, established partnerships, and community-building efforts put us in a position to be highly impactful in meeting these goals, specifically around the Strategic Growth Area of Creative Denton.

[See attachment for goals and related work items completed.](#)

What success looks like

If we are able to accomplish the items listed above, we would be able to see success through

- A more diverse group of members and mentors at Stoke and more job and business creation in tech and creative industries.
- Increased regional awareness around the startup and entrepreneurial ecosystem in Denton.

- Increased support, resources, and connectivity for female and minority entrepreneurs.
- Video, audio, and written content that can be used to market Denton's creative and tech entrepreneurs that help tell the story of Denton.
- Growing engagement and followers on all social platforms and newsletters, further establishing Stoke as an expert resource for entrepreneurs.
- More connectedness between anchor institutions throughout the entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystem in Denton.
- Increased awareness locally about the individuals and businesses that are making Denton a creative and unique community.
- A growing and more connected network of entrepreneurs, investors, mentors, and students.

What we have done

Hickory & Rail Ventures LLC has been managing Stoke Coworking since December 2018. Since then, we have helped educate, inspire, and empower entrepreneurs in Denton while providing a professional, collaborative, and engaging place for startups, freelancers, and remote workers to work.

We took over the lease on the 9,216 sq ft space in 2021 and negotiated with the building owner to build 12 private offices to accommodate more entrepreneurs. The additional offices made it possible for us to stay in our location and increase our membership numbers and revenue. Currently we have 20 private offices, 30 dedicated desks, and over 25 hot seats in our coworking space.

We recently signed a new 5 ½ year lease that includes an expansion into the suite next door. This 2,725 sq ft space includes 8 additional offices, two gender neutral restrooms, an improved mail center and copy room, and a multi-purpose Community Room that will allow us to grow our program capacity. The Community Room will be able to easily accommodate 25-30 people for workshops, larger meetings, and trainings hosted by Stoke and will also be available to rent to the community at large. When not being used for those purposes, it will serve as overflow coworking space as our current space is consistently close to capacity.

This expansion will mean we have a total of 28 private offices and lease a total of almost 12,000 sq ft of space to serve the small businesses, creatives, freelancers, and remote workers of Denton.

Over the years we have grown our team significantly. **What started as 1 FTE is now a team of 4 FTE positions to maintain the operations of our coworking space, our programs and events, and the marketing necessary to support continued growth.**

Membership

The work that our member companies perform is diverse. Stoke members work in a range of industries and their work includes software development, web and app design and development, digital marketing and sales, instructional design, content creation (podcast, video, photography, writing), cybersecurity, legal, bookkeeping, and IT support.

Through our member surveys we know that Stoke members have watched their businesses grow in a range of ways. Direct impact to the business growth due to being a member of Stoke includes gaining education and connecting with resources, networking with a diverse network of peers, hiring and getting hired from within the member community, and finding co-founders and collaborators.

Membership Outcomes:

- Currently have 99 member companies and 123 individual members
- 72% of members have reported experiencing business growth
 - Exceeding revenue goals
 - Landing new clients
 - Hiring new employees
 - Raising funds
 - Filing their LLC
 - Launching new product/service
- 8.9 Member satisfaction rate
- 7.5 Net Promoter Score

Programs and Event

Stoke has launched programs and events with content focused on the needs of small businesses and startups including business planning, content marketing, fundraising, product development, taxes, website design and development, sales, and more. **In 2024 alone we hosted 43 events with 646 attendees. Highlights include:**

- Global Entrepreneurship Week consisting of a Lunch & Learn, Big Ideas Creative Mixer, and the culmination of the third annual Denton Pitch Competition.
- The 7th annual FlintConf was held at the Patterson Appleton Arts Center in May. The kickoff event for the conference, First Strike, the evening before at Stoke.

- Launching quarterly AccelerateHER Denton alumni meetups and hosting a networking event for women entrepreneurs.
- Hosting five Spark Creative Mixers since kicking that series off in spring of 2024
- Hosting 9 Coffee + Convos sessions with 62 attendees (90+ events and 450+ attendees since inception in 2020)

Program Impacts:

- 95.7% give our program effectiveness an 8 or higher (out of possible 10)
- 7.8 Net Promoter Score
- Business outcomes include
 - Increased revenue/new revenue stream
 - New customers
 - New business partners
 - New hires
 - New services
 - Product launch
 - Started a new business
- Business skills gained include
 - Business financial literacy
 - Business planning
 - Improved workflows
 - Exposure to new customers and partners

The Denton Pitch Competition has become one of our largest events and programs that we do, with incredible outcomes for some of the winners of the event. Below are highlights of growth for some of the winners of the competition over the years.

Denton Pitch Competition Outcomes:

- Business
- 83% of survey respondents experienced business growth including
 - Increased Revenue
 - New Customers
 - New Partners
 - Job Creation
 - New Services and Products
 - New Business Launched
- 67% experienced customer growth
- 100% of survey respondents experienced growth in their teams
- Net Promoter Score is 8.7

Marketing + Content

Through our content creation and marketing efforts, we have provided a platform for both our members and the startup community of Denton to share their experiences through highlights on our blog, member spotlights.

Since launching in April of 2018, we have published 164 blog posts highlighting our services, events, and members, as well as providing helpful tips and information for entrepreneurs, freelancers, and remote workers. Additionally we have:

- Received earned media in the Denton Record Chronicle and Dallas Innovates on multiple occasions. Featured in Shoutout DFW, Denton County Magazine, NT Daily, North Texas INNO.
- Published a playbook to accompany FlintConf starting in 2021 and have created one each year since then.
- Created a digital resource guide for entrepreneurs into a downloadable resource on our website available for free.
- Created a YouTube channel to house the video content we've produced from our programs and events
- 2 professionally shot and produced videos by local entrepreneurs highlighting FlintConf and Denton Pitch Competition
- 12 blog posts written since October 2024 (164 written since 2018)
- 63% growth in newsletter subscribers since September 2024

Over time we have grown our presence online through our social media presence. We use both paid ads and organic content for our channels. Highlights include:

- Following on social media platforms to over 5,170 (21% growth over previous year)
- Monthly average reach of over 39,878 (77% growth over previous year)
- Average monthly engagement of 1,869 individuals (122% increase over previous year) .

Partnerships + Ecosystem Development

Stoke has adopted the tagline “cultivating community & empowering entrepreneurs,” and we collaborate with partners to amplify the impact of our efforts. We have partnered with community stakeholders and organizations including TWU Center for Women Entrepreneurs, UNT, NCTC, DISD, Denton Chamber of Commerce, TechMill, Denton Main Street Association, Denton Black Film Festival, Discover Denton, Stronger Denton, the Small Business Development Center, Denton Public Library, Her Texas, Greater Denton Arts Council, and others.

Through these partnerships, we have hosted and supported hackathons, networking mixers, panel discussions, tech-focused career fairs, business workshops, code schools, and a range of tech and business focused meetups. We are constantly working to develop new ways to work with these existing partners as well as pursue new partnerships.

Ecosystem outcomes:

- Thought leaders participating as mentors and workshop leaders for AccelerateHER and Coffee + Convo
- Partner participation as judges for Denton Pitch Competition
- Input being engaged for Innovation Summit
- Stoke members and program participants expanded networks