

Phyllis Hager – Stafford Mercantile

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

January 30, 2013. Washington DC. In the United States Senate chamber, one senator is describing the challenges facing a rural community and the way the citizens of that community rose to the challenge. This senator is talking about Stafford, Kansas, where citizens came together to create a home-owned department store of their own and also save the local hospital through grass-roots initiative. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Phyllis Hager is one of the local citizens who led the effort to create this new store, called Stafford Mercantile. She explained that the Duckwalls store in Stafford closed in 2011, meaning that local residents had to travel more than twenty miles to do their routine shopping.

So, local business leaders got together to see what could be done. The Stafford Development Group now owns the old store building. Phyllis Hager and others went together to organize the new store which operates there. The store is known as the Stafford Mercantile. It is a community-owned store supported by local investors. On November 2, 2012, the Stafford Mercantile had its grand opening.

“We have excellent investors,” Phyllis said. This initiative utilizes a tool called Investment Kansas Exemption or IKE – sounds like Kansas - which is offered through the Kansas Securities Commission.

The Stafford Mercantile is described as a plentiful variety store including an old-fashioned 1928 soda fountain. The soda fountain itself is a remarkable story.

“There are maybe thirty soda fountains remaining in Kansas,” Phyllis Hager said. “This soda fountain used to be in the drugstore across the street from my office,” she said.

Like a number of rural Kansas residents these days, this soda fountain made a long journey and eventually returned home.

When the drugstore closed, the soda fountain sold and was shipped to Sterling. For 15 years, it sat in storage. “We were able to purchase that soda fountain and bring it back,” Phyllis said.

It now sits prominently in the Stafford Mercantile, where many citizens have come in and reminisced about good times around the old soda fountain. One local resident brought her mother to that store for ice cream from the same fountain used for her mother’s wedding reception in 1934. Wow.

Meanwhile, another community institution was struggling as well. After more than fifty years of service, the Stafford County Hospital was wrestling with the many issues facing the rural health care system today. In fact, the hospital was more than a half-million dollars in debt. It appeared the only option was to close its doors.

But rather than throwing in the towel and giving up, the hospital got new leadership, sought help from the folks in the county, and worked hard to make ends meet. These efforts enabled the hospital doors to remain open and continue to provide vital health care for the residents of Stafford County.

These remarkable grass-roots self-help efforts did not go unnoticed. Senator Jerry Moran learned of the initiatives in Stafford and recognized the community with a Building a Better Community Award. In January he spoke on the Senate floor about the accomplishments in Stafford, and on February 9, 2013 he was in the Stafford Mercantile to present the award in person.

“We were very honored to have Senator Moran here,” Phyllis Hager said. “It is unbelievable that a small community could do this, but we did.” After all, Stafford is a rural community of 1,145 people. Now, that’s rural.

For more information, go to www.staffordmercantileks.com.

It's time to leave Washington DC, where Senator Jerry Moran has been speaking about the community of Stafford. We too salute Phyllis Hager and all the citizens of Stafford for their grassroots community initiative. As Senator Moran said: "The community of Stafford is a success story. It is a role model. It demonstrates how teamwork and creative thinking – how caring about the future of your community – can make a positive difference for that community and for all of rural America."

And there's more. The Senator also commended a local entrepreneurship program in Stafford – but these entrepreneurs are not only operating businesses, they might also be getting ready for their senior prom. We'll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.