

A WICHITA FALLS CASE STUDY

Sikes Senter

Public Accountability and a Path to Economic Recovery

Background, current state, and a path forward

October 2026

ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper is organized in three sections. **Background** covers how the Sikes Senter purchase was sold and approved. **Current State** covers where the project stands a year later. **Path Forward** lays out what Wichita Falls should do next, drawing on Lawton, Oklahoma's experience with its own mall.

The paper relies on news reports, public agendas, and records released by the agencies involved. Those sources show what officials said and when they said it. They don't show what anyone privately knew or intended, so this paper does not claim that any official knowingly lied.

With that said, it is clear that poor judgement, inadequate planning, and poor communication led us to the situation we find ourselves in. Therefore, the author does encourage citizens to vote to REMOVE Mayor Tim Short, REMOVE the current city council, and to demand the REMOVAL of Falls Forward CEO Moriah Williams.

Background: How the Purchase Happened

1. A mall in decline

When anchor stores leave, an enclosed mall usually follows a familiar path. Foot traffic drops, vacancies rise, maintenance gets put off, and private investors lose interest. The damage doesn't stay inside the building, either. A big, decaying property drags on the businesses around it. A city that buys one gains a say over what happens next, but it also takes on the market risk. By 2025, Sikes Senter was on that path, and city leaders decided to step in.

2. The pitch

Residents were asked to back a fairly simple idea. The city's economic-development arms would buy the declining mall, hold it for a while, and hand it to a private developer who would bring in new stores and other uses. The selling point was control of a well-located site and a chance to stop the slide. The public was sold on a quick and easy transaction, without the full knowledge that none of those benefits had been secured. They depended on deals that hadn't been signed, while the cost and risk of owning the property would land on public entities the day the purchase closed.^[1, 2, 3]

The Dallas developer

In July 2025, a local news report described a plan to buy the property and sell it to a "trusted Dallas developer." Of everything said publicly before the vote, this mattered most. It answered the first question most residents would ask: how does the city get its money back? But the report didn't say the developer had signed a purchase contract, put down a deposit, agreed to a price, or committed to a construction schedule. Without any of that, the city had a prospect, and a prospect can walk away. Residents who read the report could still fairly assume the deal was mostly done.^[5]

Ron Kitchens and the big vision

As CEO of the Chamber at the time, Ron Kitchens was one of the loudest voices for the purchase. The vision he helped promote was big: new retail, other major uses, even a stadium tied to MSU.^[3, 5] It made the purchase sound like step one of a coordinated plan. Nothing in the record cited here shows that any of those uses had a binding financial or institutional commitment before the vote.

Kitchens has spent his career in economic development, and he knows the difference between an idea for a property and a signed deal with money behind it. The stadium, the new stores, and the other uses he promoted were ideas, with no binding commitments behind them. Selling them as the future of the site made the purchase look much safer than it was, and taxpayers are now covering the gap. News reports attributed the "trusted Dallas developer" claim to city officials in general, not to Kitchens specifically. Kitchens is now gone, and the city is stuck with an expensive property with few paths forward.

3. The vote

On August 14, 2025, after a public hearing, the Wichita Falls City Council and the city's sales-tax and economic-development boards voted unanimously to buy Sikes Senter. The agenda authorized a price of up to \$28 million and financing of up to \$19 million. Some residents at the hearing were hopeful about redevelopment. Others, including mall merchants, worried they'd be pushed out. These fears would later prove to be well founded. The sale closed on October 15, 2025, for about \$27.5 million.^[1, 2, 3]

Mayor Tim Short's case

Mayor Short argued that the city needed to control what happened to the site. That's a reasonable argument, since a dying mall can pull down the businesses and neighborhoods around it. But getting control was the easy part. What mattered was how the city would get out: who would buy the property, for how much, and when. When the council approved the deal and when it closed, the public record shows no signed buyer, no agreed price, and no schedule. Short took the city into a commitment of nearly \$28 million anyway.^[1, 2, 6]

The council's role

The council shares the blame. Every member voted yes on a deal this size with no committed buyer on record. Nothing in the materials reviewed for this paper shows any member asking, before the vote, for a signed letter of intent, a worst-case scenario, or an estimate of what the city would pay if redevelopment stalled.

Current State: Where Things Stand a Year Later

4. Still no developer

In March 2026, five months after closing, Mayor Short said several developers had shown interest and interviews were still going on. That's how you describe a search in its early stages. Whatever council members and residents believed in the summer of 2025, the mayor's own update makes clear there was no enforceable deal behind the purchase.^[6]

By September 2026, Forward Wichita Falls was still reviewing proposals, and news coverage reported no firm offers.^[7, 8] That timeline doesn't fit a project that had a buyer lined up before closing. It doesn't prove anyone lied, and it can't tell us how the council would have voted with a fuller picture. It does leave residents with an expensive property, no agreement, and no clear idea of what comes next. The confidence of the original pitch is hard to square with that result, and the officials and economic-development leaders who ran this project owe the public an explanation.

Moriah Williams's record

Short made the decision. Moriah Williams, as CEO of Forward Wichita Falls, has been in charge of turning it into a deal, and that hasn't happened. Nearly a year after closing, her organization was still evaluating proposals with no firm offers reported. That's the clearest measure of her poor performance in her role as CEO of Forward Wichita Falls.^[7]

Residents still haven't been told where things stand: which developers were only curious, which made proposals, whether any were picked, and whether anyone has signed anything. No such accounting appears in the public record. Nothing in the record shows Williams was the source of the July 2025 Dallas-developer claim, but she has run the project through the long quiet stretch that followed it.

The author advocates for her IMMEDIATE removal as CEO of Forward Wichita Falls on the grounds of incompetence, failure to obey the law, and abysmal communication.

5. The records fight

When people asked for information, **Forward Wichita Falls tried to keep it from them**. In September 2026, the organization moved to withhold records about the Sikes purchase, with Williams arguing it didn't have to release them.^[8] The Texas Attorney General ruled otherwise, finding that Forward Wichita Falls hadn't shown the records were exempt under the Public Information Act and had to release them.^[9]

A group spending public money on a public building lost a public-records dispute to the state's top lawyer. After that, its claims that secrecy protects the project deserve little weight. Keeping a bidder's terms private during active negotiations can be justified. Keeping residents in the dark about their own financial exposure, who made which decisions, and what has actually been signed can't be.

6. The renderings

In June 2026, before any developer had been chosen, Forward Wichita Falls released renderings of a redeveloped mall.^[10] They were attractive pictures. They came with no financing, no buyer, and no schedule, and the public still lacked basic facts about the deal it was paying for.

7. What it's costing

WFEDC records from April 2026 show a bank note of about \$18 million. Every month without a developer adds interest, upkeep, and other carrying costs, along with the expense of moving tenants and preparing the site. An appraisal close to the purchase price says something about what the property is worth. It says nothing about whether the city will recover what it has spent.^[4]

The cost isn't only on the public balance sheet. Merchants warned before the vote that being forced out would cost them their businesses and their regular customers, and later news coverage showed businesses relocating as the mall's future shifted. Any honest tally has to count the businesses lost, moved, or kept, and separate new jobs from jobs that simply moved across town.^[2, 3]

8. Spending tax payer money without a plan

THE CENTRAL FINDING

Wichita Falls paid for control of Sikes Senter. Before the purchase, after it, and today, no one has shown the public what that control is supposed to accomplish. There is NO PLAN for the mall or for the region.

Wichita Falls spent \$27.5 million to control Sikes Senter, and no one has ever told the public the real plan. What is the plan?

That question should have come first. Buying a mall is a tool, and a tool needs a job. An economic strategy would have defined that job by naming the industries the city wants to grow, the employers it hopes to attract, the workers those employers need, and where outside investment will come from. It would also have given everyone a way to judge the deal. Developers would know what the city was looking for. Council members could weigh each proposal against a clear goal. Residents would know what success looks like and when to ask why it hasn't arrived. Without a strategy, the city can only react to whoever shows up with an offer.

That is where Wichita Falls finds itself. Before the vote, residents heard about buying the property, finding a developer, and a long list of possible uses, from shops and entertainment to institutional space and mixed-use development.^[1, 3, 5] That was a list of things that could go on the land, not a plan for the economy. After the purchase came a developer search and a set of renderings,^[6, 10] which showed what the site might look like but said nothing about jobs or tax revenue. As of September 2026, Forward Wichita Falls was still sorting through developer proposals.^[7] Mayor Short, the City Council, and Moriah

Williams have yet to publicly present any strategy that explains where Sikes Senter fits, and Ron Kitchens took his golden parachute and moved out of state.

Signing a developer won't fix the lack of a plan. A deal would settle who owns the building, not what the city is trying to build. This paper can only judge what has been made public. If a fuller strategy sits in an internal file somewhere, the people paying for the mall deserve to see it.

Path Forward: What Wichita Falls Should Do Next

9. Open the books

Before anyone talks about a bigger vision, Wichita Falls should publish one complete accounting: what the purchase cost, the debt terms and payments, operating costs, tenant moves, legal and consulting fees, expected infrastructure spending, and what the city expects to net from a developer deal. It should also publish a dated list of developer contacts that separates casual interest from written proposals, signed contracts, and financed construction.

What each party owes the public

- **Mayor Short and the City Council** should release the original risk analysis, any letters of intent, the financial model they relied on, the alternatives they looked at, and a current comparison of projected and actual costs. Until they do, the order of events tells the story. The city spent the money first and started looking for a plan afterward.^[6]
- **Moriah Williams and Forward Wichita Falls** should comply fully with the Attorney General's ruling and publish the developer pipeline: who has been contacted, what each has proposed, and what, if anything, has been signed. Ms. Williams should also be fired for her failure to comply with the law and for her failures as the leader of Forward Wichita Falls.^[9]

Settling the record

Whether redevelopment was a good idea is a separate question. The question here is whether officials were honest about what was certain and what wasn't, and that can be checked. List every statement made about a developer before the vote, who made it, when, what agreement or correspondence backed it, and what had actually been signed as of that date. Then anyone can see whether residents heard a hopeful but fair pitch or a misleading one.

The citizens of Wichita Falls deserve accountability from their leadership, and they deserve a plan for how we recover. Until such time as a true plan is advanced, all of these elected officials should be replaced.

10. Lawton could show us a path forward

Lawton, Oklahoma, faced the same problem first. It closed on its Central Mall purchase in January 2021, after Sears and Dillard's had left.^[11] Wichita Falls bought Sikes Senter in October 2025 and is working on a concept called The Corridor at University Town Center.^[1, 3] For both cities, the question is whether public ownership delivers enough to justify what it costs.

Lawton began with an industry rather than a building. Fort Sill is home to the Army's artillery and air-and-missile-defense missions, and the city saw a chance to build around them. FISTA was set up to bring defense contractors, tech firms, training programs, and Army partners together in one place. The old Sears space was simply room that happened to be available. Lawton knew what it wanted before it decided where to put it.^[13]

FISTA was organized as a public trust authority with a narrow job. It could recruit tenants, manage specialized space, pursue outside funding, and work across government, industry, and education. That kept innovation recruiting separate from the day-to-day work of managing city property. Retail stayed in parts of the mall while empty sections were converted over time.^[13, 14]

Lawton's costs and results

Lawton paid about \$14.6 million for the mall, and that was only the start.^[12] News reports found more than \$8 million in city support to FISTA between July 2022 and December 2023, on top of the purchase, and the state has been asked for more. FISTA's leaders have said lease income covers the mortgage, with the city as a backstop.^[14, 15]

\$98M+ Reported investment	165+ Active jobs supported	~\$19M Annual payroll	11,000+ Annual visitors
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Figures reported by FISTA..^[16]

A July 2025 report counted 27 tech companies on site, 23 of them new to Oklahoma.^[17] In August 2026, the City of Lawton announced a major Leidos expansion and said FISTA had attracted 34 defense partners.^[18] Those are good signs. They don't show how much of the growth came from the mall purchase itself.

What not to copy

FISTA's defense recruiting works because of Fort Sill's particular missions and the relationships built around them. Wichita Falls can't assume Sheppard will produce the same contracting opportunities, or that tech tenants, federal grants, or a dedicated authority will show up because the city bought a mall. What Lawton offers is a method: build on a real local strength, find out what customers need, and keep careful books.

11. A plan for Wichita Falls: the Aerospace Talent Partnership

A STARTING POINT

This is a plan for recovery from the mess our city leaders have gotten the community into. It is nothing but a possible path forward that could lead to a meaningful revival of the mall.

The plan is built from publicly available data and is meant to open a serious community conversation. Its numbers, partners, and targets are proposals. Employers, schools, workforce leaders, and residents should test and change them before anything is funded.

The goal

Within three years, make Wichita Falls the first choice for people trained in aircraft production, repair, and maintenance, and make sure local employers can hire them here.

Why this focus

Wichita Falls has been losing ground slowly. In early 2024, the metro area had 59,300 nonfarm jobs, still slightly below its early-2019 peak, and only 5 of 11 job sectors had returned to 2019 levels, a weaker recovery than elsewhere in Texas. Between 2010 and 2020, the metro area lost about 320 people a year, mainly because roughly 630 more people moved out than moved in each year.^[19]

At the same time, the region has two strengths that most cities its size don't. The first is Sheppard. It is the area's largest employer, with 7,225 employees, and the Air Force's largest training base, with a local economic impact of \$3.6 billion in 2021.^[19] Its host wing trains more than 60,000 students a year across roughly 900 courses, including all of the Air Force's aircraft maintenance training.^[21] Most of those trainees leave town when they finish.

The second is a growing aerospace and manufacturing base. In September 2026, Howmet Aerospace announced a roughly \$70 million expansion of its Wichita Falls plant, adding about 100,000 square feet and an expected 230 jobs.^[20] Pratt & Whitney has announced a \$10 million expansion adding 30 full-time jobs, and Westlake Corporation a \$134 million expansion creating 70 full-time jobs by 2027.^[19]

That adds up to about 330 announced manufacturing jobs, in a city where the Air Force trains tens of thousands of aircraft technicians every year. Connecting those two facts is the plan.

The Lawton Lesson

Lawton succeeded by choosing one strength and building around it, and Wichita Falls should do the same. Healthcare is a strong candidate for a second phase. United Regional employs about 2,100 people, and the \$452 million North Texas State Hospital project is expected to support continued job growth.^[19] It should be added only after the first lane is working.

12. How it would work

The Partnership would run three programs. Each has a clear purpose, a lead partner, and a measure of success.

Program 1: Fill the jobs already announced

Purpose: Make sure the Howmet, Pratt & Whitney, and Westlake expansions are staffed by people who live here.

How: Employers define the skills they need for roles such as machine operators, inspectors, coating technicians, and maintenance staff. Vernon College and the regional workforce board build short, paid training courses around those needs, with guaranteed interviews for graduates. Vernon College already teaches machine tool operation, blueprint reading, and CNC programming at its Skills Training Center in Wichita Falls,^[22] so the work starts by expanding a program that exists rather than creating a new one.

Lead: Regional workforce board, with Vernon College as the main training provider.

Measure: Share of announced jobs filled by local hires.

Program 2: Keep Sheppard's people

Purpose: Turn the base's training pipeline into a local workforce.

How: Set up a single transition desk serving airmen leaving the service, military spouses, retirees, and civilian instructors. It would translate military training into civilian credentials, match people with local employers before they leave, and use Defense Department transition programs such as SkillBridge so service members can train with local companies during their final months of service.

Lead: Regional workforce board, working with Sheppard's transition and family-support offices.

Measure: Number of Sheppard-connected people hired by employers in the region.

Program 3: Grow local suppliers

Purpose: Keep more of each expansion's spending in Wichita Falls.

How: Identify the parts and services large plants buy from outside the region, such as machining, testing, coatings, and tooling. Then help local small businesses earn the certifications and equipment needed to compete for that work. MSU Texas can provide engineering and business support.

Lead: MSU Texas, with Forward Wichita Falls supporting outreach to employers.

Measure: Number of local businesses qualified to supply area plants, and the dollar value of their contracts.

Where Sikes Senter fits

The Partnership may need a shared aerospace skills center with training bays, employer testing space, and a public front door for job seekers. Sikes Senter is one possible location, but not the only one. In the

first six months, the Partnership should compare three options: space at Sikes Senter, an expansion of Vernon College’s Skills Training Center, and a site near the major plants. The choice should go to whichever delivers training fastest at the lowest total cost. If that isn’t the mall, the plan goes ahead without it.

13. Governance, funding, and accountability

Leadership

One organization must be in charge, with a named director, a budget, and a duty to report publicly. This plan proposes the regional workforce board as lead, because it already manages training funds and employer relationships. A steering committee would include the major employers, Vernon College, MSU Texas, Sheppard’s liaison, Forward Wichita Falls, and one independent member with financial oversight experience. Given the concerns raised in Stage 2, Forward Wichita Falls would serve as a partner, not the lead.

Funding

The first phase should be small and paid for mostly by those who benefit. Employers would cover part of the cost of training their future workers; that is the clearest proof that the demand is real. Public funding should come from state workforce training grants, Texas programs that support defense communities, and federal programs tied to military installations. Local tax dollars should fill gaps, not lead.

Three-year roadmap

Phase	Goal	Key actions
Months 0–6	Confirm and commit	Get written hiring commitments and skill requirements from Howmet, Pratt & Whitney, and Westlake. Choose the lead organization and hire a director. Complete the site comparison. Apply for state and federal training funds. Publish a baseline report showing current local hiring, wages, and public spending.
Months 6–18	Launch and test	Run the first employer-designed training courses. Open the Sheppard transition desk. Begin supplier qualification with a small first group of local businesses. Report results every quarter.
Months 18–36	Expand what works	Scale the programs that meet their targets and end the ones that don’t. Decide whether to add healthcare as a second lane. Commission an independent review of results and costs.

Proposed year-one targets

These are starting points for discussion:

- Half of the roughly 330 announced manufacturing jobs filled by residents of the region.

- 300 people completing employer-designed training, with at least 70 percent hired within 90 days.
- 100 Sheppard-connected people hired by local employers.
- Five local businesses qualified as aerospace suppliers.
- At least one outside dollar (employer, state, or federal) for every local public dollar spent.

What the public would see

The Partnership would publish a quarterly scorecard covering:

Measure	What it includes
Jobs	Local hires, placement rates, retention at 6 and 12 months, and wages compared with the regional average
Sheppard retention	Service members, spouses, and retirees hired locally
Suppliers	Businesses qualified and contract dollars won
Money	Total public spending, outside funding brought in, and cost per person placed
Decisions	Milestones met or missed, and any program expanded, changed, or ended

Questions to settle before launch

- Do employers confirm the skill gaps this plan assumes, and will they put money behind training?
- Is the regional workforce board the right lead, or is another organization better positioned?
- Should healthcare wait for phase two, or start sooner?
- Is Sikes Senter the right home for the skills center, or should the plan go elsewhere?
- What results would mean the plan isn't working, and who makes that call?

Conclusion

Wichita Falls bought a mall on the strength of a pitch that promised more than it had secured. A year later there is still no developer, the organization running the project lost a fight to keep its records private, and residents have never been shown what the city's control of the site is for.

The way out starts with opening the books. After that, an Aerospace Talent Partnership could connect what Wichita Falls already has: Sheppard's training pipeline, employers that are expanding, and local colleges. If it's built around confirmed employer demand, spends in stages, and reports results publicly, it could give the city something it has never had in this project: a real economic strategy.

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METHOD NOTE

Figures from news reports and organizations are credited to the original publishers as cited. The structures, phases, and programs proposed here are recommendations and do not reflect adopted city policy.