

# TOWN COUNCIL

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## STAFF REPORT Executive Department

<b>MEETING DATE:</b>	May 12, 2026
<b>PROJECT:</b>	Consideration of An Ordinance Authorizing an Economic Development Incentive Agreement between the Town of Bluffton Sterling Corporation (d/b/a Sterling Helicopter) First Reading
<b>PROJECT MANAGER:</b>	David Nelems, Director of Special Projects

### REQUEST:

Request for Town Council to first reading of an ordinance approving the execution and delivery of an economic development agreement for Sterling Corporation (d/b/a Sterling Helicopter)

### BACKGROUND:

The laws or Constitution of the State of South Carolina, 1895, as amended, empowers towns to enact ordinances related to the expenditure of public funds for public purposes and necessary for the Town to levy certain taxes and fees.

Town residential development has grown exponentially over the past decade. Commercial development has lagged the residential growth. Certain areas of the Town of Bluffton, notably west of Buckwalter parkway, are experiencing a void of commercial development in certain critical service industries. There also remains a lack of affordable housing to accommodate the demand for a diverse local workforce.

In September of 2023 the Bluffton Town Council adopted an Ordinance establishing an economic development incentives plan:

- (i) To promote the redevelopment of existing buildings and infill development within the Incentive Areas;
- (ii) To support the establishment of the categories of new businesses that the Council determines will significantly increase the overall commercial activity within the Town, provide the Town's residents with sufficient options within the Town rather than having to travel elsewhere; encourage tourists and those who reside in surrounding communities to make use of businesses within the Town; and increase

property values within the Town as a whole; and

- (iii) To develop the Incentive Areas into commercial spaces that match the Town's sense of place and contributes to the Council's overall priorities established within ur Comprehensive and Strategic Plans; and
- (iv) To support the development of affordable housing to encourage relocation of professionals working in one of the professions supported by the incentivized developments.

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The intended use of the development must be for one or more of the following business purposes:

- (i) healthcare, dental, home health, pharmaceutical retail, and similar ancillary uses;
- (ii) childcare services;
- (iii) affordable housing developments (separately or part of a larger project);
- (iv) mixed use commercial and similar flex-use space;
- (v) corporate headquarters; and
- (vi) other uses, as may be determined by the Council, that are consistent with the Goals, and the Plans.

#### **Economic Development Incentive Program Summary:**

Applicant: Sterling Corporation (d/b/a Sterling Helicopter)

Location: Buckwalter Place

Industry Sector: Aerospace

DRCI received a grant request from Sterling Corporation (d/b/a Sterling Helicopter), an established aerospace engineering and certification company, seeking to expand its operations by establishing a new facility in Bluffton, South Carolina.

The proposed project includes the lease and upfit of approximately **3,000 square feet** of commercial space located at 65 Innovation Drive. #101 in the Buckwalter Commerce Park. The facility will support two primary divisions of the company's operations, including FAA Parts Manufacturer Approval (FAA-PMA) and a future FAA Organization Designation Authorization (FAA-ODA), which is currently under review by the Federal Aviation Administration.

This Bluffton location will represent the company's fourth facility and its first in South Carolina. The project requires interior buildout to accommodate aerospace engineering, certification, inspection, and administrative functions.

Sterling anticipates executing a lease in March 2026, completing the buildout by June 30, 2026, and commencing operations in July 2026.

*The total capital investment in the project over five years is \$367,000.*

### **Job Creation & Wages**

The project will create approximately 15 full-time jobs

Projected wages for the positions are approximately \$35.13 per hour, equivalent to roughly \$41,600 annually per employee (based on full-time employment).

The practice anticipates continued growth beyond Year 3 as patient capacity expands.

### **Community & Economic Impact**

The Sterling Helicopter project represents a strategic investment in expanding Bluffton's presence in advanced industry sectors, specifically aerospace and aviation services.

The project will:

- Introduce aerospace engineering and FAA-certified operations to the local economy
- Support aviation safety advancements through FAA certification and design services
- Create high-wage, technical employment opportunities
- Diversify the Town's economic base beyond retail and traditional service industries
- Strengthen Bluffton's position as a location capable of supporting advanced manufacturing and engineering services

Notably, the proposed FAA-ODA designation would be the **first of its kind in South Carolina**, further elevating Bluffton's role in the aerospace sector.

In addition to job creation, the private investment in facility buildout and long-term lease commitment represents a meaningful expansion of commercial activity within the Buckwalter Parkway corridor and supports the Town's economic development goals.

### **Grant Rationale**

The ordinance allows for grant awards equal to; up to 50% of all permitting fees, up to 100% of BJWSA capacity fees and up to 50% of business license fees for up to five years. The Council has additional discretion to grant additional grant amount if deemed necessary to advance the goals of the ordinance.

Staff have developed the following guide for determining eligible grant amounts based on the significance of qualifying development



aerospace operation represents a unique opportunity to attract high-skill, high-wage employment and position the Town within an emerging and underrepresented industry sector.

Given the project's alignment with strategic goals, its potential long-term economic impact, and the positive signal it sends regarding Bluffton's support for advanced industries, staff supports consideration of this incentive despite the project not fully meeting standard investment thresholds.

**NEXT STEPS:** The Town Council may approve the ordinance as submitted, approve with amendments, or deny approval of the ordinance.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Ordinance
2. Grant Request Letter
3. Project Profile Worksheet
4. Motion

**AN ORDINANCE OF THE TOWN OF BLUFFTON, SOUTH CAROLINA,  
APPROVING THE EXECUTION AND DELIVERY OF A DEVELOPMENT  
AGREEMENT WITH STERLING CORPORATION (D/B/A STERLING  
HELICOPTER).**

**WHEREAS**, South Carolina law authorizes municipalities to take actions not inconsistent with the Constitution and general laws of the State, regarding any subject the municipality finds necessary and proper for the general welfare and convenience of the municipality, including to execute and deliver contracts, to assist in redeveloping blighted areas, and to expend public funds for economic development; and

**WHEREAS**, the Council has further determined that the Town should offer certain incentives to encourage private investment and recruit both small businesses and new employers to the Incentive Areas; and

**WHEREAS**, while the Incentives may benefit the Incentive Recipients (as defined herein), the primary beneficiary of the Incentives will be the Town and its citizens who shall realize the following benefits (the "Benefits"):

- (i) Increased property values within the Incentive Areas and the Town as a whole;
- (ii) Increased revenue from property taxes, business license fees, and permit fees;
- (iii) Increased tourism and commercial activity within the Town as a whole; and
- (iv) Meeting needs of the community residents by encouraging growth within targeted sectors to provide adequate services to Town residents; and
- (v) Assist in providing access to a variety of affordable housing options; and,

**WHEREAS**, the Incentives, as provided for in an Incentive Agreement (as defined herein), shall be structured in such a way that the value of the Benefits to the Town will exceed the value to the Incentive Recipients; and

**WHEREAS**, the financial benefit of the Incentives to the Incentive Recipients will only be realized at such time as certain Benchmarks (as defined herein) are met or continue to be met. Should all the Benchmarks be accomplished, the Town believes that there is a high probability that the Benefits will be realized by the Town and that the value of the Benefits will exceed the value public funds expended on the Incentives; and

**WHEREAS**, Sterling Corporation (d/b/a Sterling Helicopter) ("Developer") owns real property (the "Property") in the Town of Bluffton, South Carolina (the "City") and to develop the Property; and

**WHEREAS**, on the Property, Developer intends (a) to invest three hundred and sixty seven thousand dollars (\$367,000) for leasehold improvements and equipment of 3000 square feet of Aerospace space (collectively, the "Development") located at 65 Innovation Drive. #101 in Buckwalter Place Commerce Park.

**BE IT ORDAINED BY THE TOWN COUNCIL OF THE TOWN OF  
BLUFFTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, AS FOLLOWS:**

1. The City hereby authorizes the Town Manager to make minor corrections, execute, and deliver such documents as may be necessary or useful to affect the implementation of the Economic Development Agreement attached to this ordinance.

2. The Project Agreement, with whatever changes are (a) not materially adverse to the Town and (b) approved by the Town Manager (after advice of Town's counsel), is approved and is incorporated by reference in this Ordinance as if set forth fully in the Ordinance's body. The Town Manager's execution of the final Project Agreement shall be conclusive evidence of the Town's approval thereof.

3. The Town Manager is, acting alone, authorized to take whatever actions and execute and deliver whatever documents (including the Project Agreement) as either of them deems appropriate to affect this Ordinance's intent.

**THIS ORDINANCE SHALL BE EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY UPON SECOND READING.**

**TOWN OF BLUFFTON, SOUTH CAROLINA**

Larry Toomer Mayor



**Subject:** Consideration of a Grant

**Dated:** 03 MARCH 2026

Dear Town of Bluffton,

Sterling Corporation (d/b/a Sterling Helicopter) was founded in 1984 in Philadelphia, PA. We currently have 3 locations (2 in Philadelphia, PA and 1 in Hollywood, Florida) and wish to open a fourth location in Beaufort County, namely the Town of Bluffton. We currently have 2 remote employees working from Beaufort County and wish to provide them with a facility to expand and grow our business. We plan to add about 15 aerospace positions within the next 5 years.

### **Project**

Sterling's project desire is to open a 3,000 square foot facility space in Bluffton, South Carolina. This would house 2 aspects of our business. Those divisions within Sterling would be an FAA-PMA and a future FAA-ODA. FAA-PMA is an FAA quality system oversight that allows inspection and approval of aerospace parts. The future FAA-ODA would authorize Sterling to manage and approve FAA projects internally to Sterling, with minimal FAA oversight. The FAA issued Sterling an FAA-PMA in 2021 in Philadelphia. This would be relocated to Bluffton. The FAA-ODA is in the application process with the FAA. We are at the stage that the FAA is seeking an address for the ODA, we wish to have that address in Bluffton. This FAA-ODA would be the first ever STC-ODA issued by the FAA to a business located in the state of South Carolina.

### **Location**

The location of the Sterling facility would be tentatively located off Buckwalter Pkwy. We are looking at a new facility there to lease. This facility is located within the Town of Bluffton jurisdiction and zoning.

### **Target Industry**

Sterling's target industry for the Bluffton location is to support the aerospace industry by providing FAA Supplemental Type Certificates (STC) development services, which include FAA certification, engineering, design, and other needed support as well as foreign validation services worldwide. Our core mission is to enhance aviation safety by developing FAA-STCs to the aerospace aftermarket industry. These STCs incorporate cutting edge technologies for both fixed and rotor wing aircraft that increase safety of flight. This mission directly aligns with the FAA's commitment to aviation safety. Sterling also seeks to have the Bluffton facility certified to AS9100 standards. This will allow us to target Airframer OEMs and other Aerospace companies as a Tier 1 supplier. The positions we seek to add to our Bluffton location would include Aerospace Quality Management, Aerospace Quality Inspection, Aerospace Engineering, Aerospace Certification, and Aerospace Administration.

# **STERLING**

## **Helicopter**

### **Current Status**

Sterling has identified a location and facility to accommodate our growth. This is a new facility but requires an upfit / build-out to finish the inside to accommodate our needs. This facility manager has provided a draft 5-year lease agreement which is currently being reviewed by our corporate attorney. If we choose to move forward, any Grant from the Town of Bluffton would greatly assist in our doing so.

### **Project Timeline**

Our current timeline with the draft lease we have in hand is potentially signing in March of 2026. This would allow the build-out process to start and complete by June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2026. We would then move into the facility in July of 2026.

We request your assistance to coordinate this effort with Town of Bluffton as we would greatly benefit from the Grant. If you have any questions or require further assistance, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Edward Allen", written over a horizontal line.

Edward Allen  
Director of Engineering/FAA-DARF/PMA Quality Manager  
Sterling Helicopter  
[edward.allen@sterlinghelicopter.com](mailto:edward.allen@sterlinghelicopter.com)  
+1 (812) 972-9185

Project Profile Worksheet	
Project Information	
Company Name:	Sterling Helicopter
Project Name:	Stand-up Bluffton Location
Type of Project:	New Location in SC
Type of Entity:	C Corp
Type of Business:	Manufacturing
NAICS or SIC Code:	
Address:	1226 River Road, Croydon, PA 19021
Completed By:	Edward Allen - Director of Engineering
Phone Number:	812-972-9185
Email Address:	Edward.Allen@SterlingHelicopter.com
Date:	1/29/26



**Project Description - Please include the product/service and a brief description of the project including timing.**

Sterling Helicopter is seeking to potentially open a location in Bluffton, South Carolina. This location would offer 2 main services to our Aerospace clients. Service one would be FAA-PMA manufacturing of aerospace parts. Service two would be professional Aerospace Engineering services for design, substantiation, compliance, certification, testing, and all other aspects needed to approve a type design change, known as a Supplemental Type Certificate. Our intention is to start our ODA (Organization Designation Authorization) office in Bluffton which is an FAA delegation to approve projects internally acting as the FAA, but with FAA oversight.

**Project Alternatives - Are other sites or project configurations under consideration? Please list other potential locations.**

Alternative sites currently include Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Pembroke Pines, Florida.

Estimated Capital Investment	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Total
	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	
Land Costs	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Building - New Construction	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Building - Purchase of Existing						\$ -
Building - Renovations						
~Internal Renovations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
~External Renovations	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Building - Leasehold Improvements	\$ 150,000	\$ 20,000	\$ 1,000	\$ 20,000	\$ 1,000	\$ 192,000.00
Machinery & Equipment - New	\$ 15,000	\$ 40,000	\$ 25,000	\$ 20,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 110,000.00
Machinery & Equipment - Used	\$ 4,000	\$ 6,000.00	\$ 5,000.00	\$ 20,000.00	\$ 30,000	\$ 65,000.00
Pollution Control Equipment	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
<b>Total Capital Investment</b>	<b>\$ 169,000.00</b>	<b>\$ 66,000.00</b>	<b>\$ 31,000.00</b>	<b>\$ 60,000.00</b>	<b>\$ 41,000.00</b>	<b>\$ 367,000.00</b>

Employment Category	By the end of the First Year of Operation		By the end of the Second Year of Operation		By the end of the Third Year of Operation		By the end of the Fourth Year of Operation		By the end of the Fifth Year of Operation		Total New Jobs to SC
	2026		2027		2028		2029		2030		
	New Full Time Jobs Created	Avg Hourly Wage	New Full Time Jobs Created	Avg Hourly Wage	New Full Time Jobs Created	Avg Hourly Wage	New Full Time Jobs Created	Avg Hourly Wage	New Full Time Jobs Created	Avg Hourly Wage	
Managerial	0	\$ -	1	\$ 40.00	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	
Professional	1	\$ 36.00	1	\$ 37.00	1	\$ 38.00	1	\$ 39.00	1	\$ 40.00	
Technical	1	\$ 30.00	1	\$ 30.00	1	\$ 31.00	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	
Sales	0	\$ -	1	\$ 37.00	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	1	\$ 37.00	
Clerical	0	\$ -	1	\$ 35.00	0	\$ -	1	\$ 36.00	0	\$ -	
Craftsman (skilled)	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	
Operators (semi-skilled)	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	
Laborers (unskilled)	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	1	\$ 25.00	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	
Service	1	\$ 36.00	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	
	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	
	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	0	\$ -	
<b>New Job Creation to Date and Avg. Weekly Wage</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>\$ 34.00</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>\$ 35.80</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>\$ 31.33</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>\$ 37.50</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>\$ 38.50</b>	<b>15</b>

Estimated Jobs Relocated to New Facility (Not included above)		
Employment Category	Full Time Jobs	Avg Annual Wage
Director, Engineering & Manufacturing	1	\$ -
Finance Manager	1	\$ -
		\$ -
		\$ -
<b>Total Transferred Jobs</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>\$ -</b>

Estimated Utility Requirements (or increase if expansion):	
Water	0
Sewer	0
Electric	3600
Internet	1800
Use of Port?	0

Estimated Business Activities:	
Annual Materials Purchased for Operations:	Sheet Metal, Plastic Filament, Hardware, Wiring, etc.
Annual Number of Visitors to the Facility:	12
Avg Visitors Length of Stay:	1 day

**Benefits - Please provide a brief description of the benefit package offered to employees in the area below. Please include percentage paid by employer.**

401(k) Match up to 4% & Paid Time Off (PTO)  
 Dental Insurance & Referral Program  
 Health Insurance (100% Company paid premium) & Flexible Spending Account (FSA)  
 Vision Insurance & Professional Development Assistance  
 Life Insurance

**Briefly describe the financing structure for this project.**

Sterling Helicopter (Sterling Corporation) is headquartered in Philadelphia, PA since 1984. This facility is needed to aid in company growth and will be originally targeted to be Sterling funded. But, due to a smaller department needing to grow, if any assistance is available through the Town of Bluffton or Beaufort Country SC, we are excited to hear what could be offered to help us expand our business in the Bluffton area.

Recommended Motion

Consideration of An Ordinance Authorizing an Economic Development Incentive Agreement between the Town of Bluffton and Sterling Corporation (d/b/a Sterling Helicopter)– David Nelems, DRCI CEO

**“I make a motion to (approve/deny/modify) the first reading of an Ordinance Authorizing an Economic Development Grant Incentive Agreement between the Town of Bluffton and Sterling Corporation (d/b/a Sterling Helicopter) for 3000 square feet of commercial space located at 65 Innovation Drive.**