

New Organization in Stoughton Fosters Innovation

Katrina Becker, Executive Director, Innovation Center Stoughton
& Abigail Becker, Senior Associate for Communications
and Outreach, UniverCity Alliance



Municipalities face increasingly complex challenges requiring new ways of thinking and enhanced collaboration and creativity.

In Stoughton, a new organization – Innovation Center Stoughton (ICS) – is the hub that brings together the public, private, and civic sectors in the pursuit of novel solutions to new and old problems.

“This is a space where people can explore ideas without boundaries and access tools and resources to bring them to life,” ICS Executive Director Katrina Becker said. “Innovation Center Stoughton is focused on establishing an environment of collaboration for the city, school district, businesses, and community leaders.

ICS will serve the Stoughton area through experiential learning, technical assistance, mentorship, and connection to a network of resources. Becker said the mission of ICS is to help individuals and organizations conceptualize, prototype, incubate, and grow their ideas.

“There is a long history of economic resilience in Stoughton. We are dedicated to fostering the attitudes and knowledge that carved out that history. By layering in new learning and ideas, the future looks very bright,” Becker said.

Currently, ICS offers three programs:

- **Guided Whiteboard Workshops:** Using structured ideation tools, participants are free to think creatively while clearly defining a problem to be solved in their organization and honing in on executable solutions.
- **Entrepreneurs:** This program provides entrepreneurs, inventors, and small business owners the opportunity to collaborate, connect with mentors, and discover resources to build their businesses.



UW-Madison students partnering with Stoughton presented to community groups on Dec. 9, 2022. From left, UCA Managing Director Gavin Luter; Bolz Center students Ellie McShane, Drew Alvarez, and Olivia Bratzke; and Katrina Becker, the executive director of Innovation Center Stoughton pose for a photo. Photo credit: Gavin Luter.

- **Creativity Workshops:** Combining art, science, and technology, these workshops focus on hitting the reset button for teams that feel stuck. Get offsite and rediscover the excitement of creating something new.

ICS builds on the success of Fab Lab Stoughton – an MIT-developed program that engages middle and high school students in experiential learning – housed in Stoughton High School. As a nonprofit organization separate from the school district, ICS brings that model of learning and

innovation to local entrepreneurs and the broader community. As the organization grows, ICS will have a physical building in the area that will be part makerspace, business incubator, and co-working space, hosting events and training, programs, and shared-use equipment.

“In 2018, we began conversations with local employers and the school district about how the Fab Lab model could be expanded to build community resilience and help solve some of the challenges facing Stoughton, such as workforce shortages and lack of support for entrepreneurs,” said Mike Connor, ICS Board President and founder of Fab Lab Stoughton. “Out of those discussions, Innovation Center Stoughton was born. With initial funding secured through generous donations from the Wahlin Foundation, City of Stoughton, and AprilAire and the addition of Ms. Becker, our planning can start taking shape.”

ICS builds on Stoughton’s longstanding history of innovation, from its founding to present day. In 1847, Luke Stoughton established the community after recognizing the potential of the Yahara River. The city became a key stop when the railroad began transporting people and cargo to Milwaukee and emerged as a leader in wagon and trailer manufacturing and engines and engineering.

Fab Lab Stoughton was also the first fab lab created in Wisconsin. There are now more than 28 in the state.

“ICS is committed to what we call ‘open source thinking,’” Becker said. “We find ways to say ‘yes,’ share knowledge, make connections for shared success, and prioritize an identified outcome over standard ways of doing business.”

To bolster efforts to establish a community innovation center, ICS and the city of Stoughton partnered with UniverCity Year from 2021-24. This UW-Madison-based program links local governments with university resources to address community-identified priorities.

Through this program, engineering students researched the intersecting interests for Stoughton employers and ICS, a team of graduate students in arts administration created a vision for ICS from stakeholder research, and a landscape architecture student redesigned an area of Stoughton known as Depot Hill, among other projects.

“When students from different academic disciplines apply their skills to one topic, they produce innovative solutions,” UCA Managing Director Gavin Luter said. “ICS and UCY are natural partners because both organizations aim to make connections, whether that’s in the community or across campus.”

About the Authors:

Katrina Becker is the Executive Director of Innovation Center Stoughton and the Vice President of Becker Professional Services, a planning and community economic development firm serving local governments and organizations in Wisconsin. Visit innovationcenterstoughton.org or email Katrina Becker at katrina@beckerproservices.com for more information.

Abigail Becker is the Senior Associate for Communications and Outreach at UniverCity Alliance. She developed an interest in supporting local governments after reporting on the city of Madison and Dane County for the *Cap Times*.



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