

Avery County Economic Development Committee
February 22, 2022

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 p.m. February 22, 2022. The meeting was held at the Avery County Administrative Building, located at 175 Linville Street, Newland, NC 28657

Present for the meeting were: Ken Walter, Susan Siirila, Dave Smith, Kate Gavenus, Clayton Harpold, Edward Dean, Anne Winkleman, Jerry Moody, Dennis Aldridge (Avery County Commissioner, Terri Melton, Cindy Turbyfill (Avery County Clerk to the Board of Commissioners) and guests: Eric Berg and Neil Falvey, Avery Journal Newspaper.

Members absent: Phillip Barrier (Avery County Manager) and Angie Berry.

Ken Walter called the meeting to order at 5:02 p.m.

(1) Approve and/or amend the January 25, 2022 minutes: Clayton Harpold made a motion to accept the minutes as presented. Dave Smith seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

(2) Unfinished Business

a. Anne Winkleman reported that the Avery County Chamber of Commerce Business Guide preparation was in the final stages. They are putting all the ads in order and proofing the document at this time.

She stated that Avery County will have an Avery County Summer Fest. Phillip Barrier and Anne Winkleman are working on this. Derek Roberts, mayor of Newland, has advised that he would like to see it held behind the old Lowes Foods building.

Ms. Winkleman reported that the Woolly Worm Committee is going to talk with the Town of Banner Elk representatives. They will present to the town representatives that the issue of parking for vendors needs to be addressed or the festival will have to be held at another location. Vendors must pay for their location plus another \$30.00 for parking.

b. The charter and mission statement are now posted on the EDC website. Mr. Walter recognized Avery County Chamber of Commerce employee Alex Gavenus for his help with making this happen.

c. Kate Gavenus: Tool Box Update: Ms. Gavenus reminded the group that at the last meeting, discussion occurred regarding collecting more information for

the Toolbox. The collection of information will be done through a survey. She reviewed material that may be included on the survey, which will be conducted using Survey Monkey. See Attachment of proposed questions for survey. Clayton Harpold suggested asking questions related to demographic data. Discussion occurred on additional data which may be collected via the survey. For example, whether the respondents are full time or part time residents of Avery County. Ms. Gavenus will provide information on the cost for the survey to Mr. Walter who will work to secure funding from the Board of Commissioners. Discussion also occurred on how to get the survey out to individuals. Suggestions included sending it out with Mountain Electric mailings or Avery Tax office mailings, and using social media. Mr. Falvey indicated that the Avery Journal Newspaper will publicize and/or publish the survey. The group agreed that a proposed time frame for administration of the survey would be Memorial Day through mid-October. Ms. Gavenus invited committee members to advise her of any other thoughts or ideas regarding the survey.

d. Phillip Barrier to report on the progress of the Four County Housing Needs Assessment project

In Mr. Barrier's absence, Dennis Aldridge reported on the project. Ken Walter reported that he, along with commissioners Dennis Aldridge and Woodhall Young, attended the High-Country housing assessment presentation. Mr. Aldridge reported that the assessment was done by Bowen Research, a nationwide research facility. The High County Association of Realtors and the affected counties (Avery, Watauga, Ashe and Allegheny) assisted with the associated costs of the assessment. Bowen's methodology and statistical work was very thorough. The assessment included data related to demographics, age, employment, rentals, sales, sales price, sales price by tier and other metrics were included in the assessment. The Avery County synopsis was about 40 pages. The entire report is 400 pages. Mr. Aldridge indicated that the data confirmed that there is a severe shortage in the way of affordable/workforce housing. The assessment showed some of the percentages. Mr. Aldridge noted that the presenter even commented on the clarity of the problem shown by the percentages, and that the assessment gives us much usable data for leveraging foundations for matching funds, developers, etc. The full assessment report is available from the High-Country Association of Realtors.

e. Phillip Barrier to report on the Occupancy Tax Status

In Mr. Barrier's absence, Dennis Aldridge reported on the occupancy tax status. He stated that the proposal for an occupancy tax for Avery County is currently before the NC General Assembly. Avery County's bill may be tied to some other counties who seek approval for an occupancy tax.

f. Phillip Barrier to report on the American Recovery Plan funds applicable to Avery County & the EDC

In Mr. Barrier's absence, Dennis Aldridge reported on the American Recovery Plan funds. He reported that we have received final federal ruling on how the funds may be used, which is definitive. We have not received the state ruling, and therefore cannot move forward without adhering to the state mandates, which are different from the federal. We are meeting with broadband providers to get an idea on what they can do, for example if we can secure broadband funding through grants, what can happen with matching funds. Mr. Aldridge stated that getting clear information on the possible use of American Recovery Plan funds has been frustrating. He added that some counties and municipalities have hired employees to help administered the funds, while others have simply returned the funds and opted not to utilize them due to administrative difficulties.

3. Phillip Barrier updates and other news re: strip mall property, Structall, etc.
Other new business news

Dave Smith re: Newland strip mall property development status and other updates

Dave Smith reported that we do have businesses who want to come here, but we have no where to put them. He has met with Bill Slagle, State Economic Development Representative. Mr. Slagle said that if we tell a business that may locate in Avery County "if you come, we will build it" that it will not work.

Business owners what a facility that is already built and ready to move into. He noted that housing issues are a strong factor and that we need to come together and decide where the town needs to grow and what the growth pattern needs to be. Ken Walter added that the above-referenced housing assessment could be a very important tool in determining possible growth patterns, planning and development.

4. New Business and/or other issues to address:

a. "Finding, Keeping and Motivating Workers Workshop" to be presented by Professor Tonya Snider – re: offer from Allen Cook.

Ken Walter proposed selecting a June 2022 date for holding the workshop. Mr. Walter will communicate with Allen Cook regarding getting the speaker lined up. He stated that Mayland Community College will cover the cost of the speaker. Avery County will provide lunch. Mr. Walter will go before the board of commissioners to secure funding for lunch for the workshop. The workshop will be held at the Avery County Community Center. Jerry Moody stated that possible open dates include: June 9, 2022, June 14, 2022 and June 15, 2022. Ken Walter will continue to gather information and report back in the March meeting.

5. Avery County Chamber of Commerce – Anne Winkleman
No report.

6. Agricultural sub-Committee Report – Jerry Moody

Mr. Moody reported that the bids on the Kill & Chill facility came back much higher than expected. Watauga County is working to try to find other grant funding to cover the extra expense. The project has not ended, but construction has not begun either. Mr. Moody stated that he felt there was a 30% chance of coming up with the needed funds.

7. Marketing sub-Committee Report – Ken Walter

No report.

8. Education sub-Committee Report – Ken Walter

Ken Walter reported that the Avery County Schools Business Advisory Council has scheduled the next meeting for March 3, 2022. Ken Walter, Jerry Moody and Phillip Barrier will be attending. Discussion occurred regarding youth entrepreneur programs, internships and retaining youth programs.

9. Future discussion and/or action topics

a. Usage of occupancy tax funds, administration and possible development of a Facebook page

Ken Walter suggested we delay discussion until the March 2022 meeting.

10. Questions, Concerns & Other

Discussion regarding developing a Facebook page.

Discussion occurred regarding the set up and administration of an Avery County Facebook page. The proposal of such a Facebook page was not approved in the past. Costs and maintenance of a Facebook page were cited as reasons why it was not approved in the past, and why it may not be approved at this time. Mr. Walter stated that it is possible to have a Facebook page for information only (no feedback) capability.

Jerry Moody shared with the group that St. Bernadette's Catholic Church in Linville will be a host site, on May 9 – May 11, 2022, for a reliquary coming from Lourdes, France. There are 30 locations in the United States that will host the reliquary over a three-day period, and Linville, NC is one of the sites. Mr. Moody stated that there will be much interest and many people coming to the area, which could create some transportation issues in the area.

The next meeting will be Tuesday, March 29, 2022.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:04 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila

Attachment: Tools to Support New or Expanding Businesses

Avery County Business Expansion and Attraction Toolbox

Methodology: A survey will be developed using Survey Monkey and be distributed to local leaders, residents and business people via email. The tabulated results will be reviewed by the EDC board.

Purpose: Survey results will determine the types of businesses and the direction that our residents and leaders feel are most desirable for the future of Avery County. This information will assist in the completion of the quantitative matrices which are the foundation of the toolbox.

Question for EDC and County Manager/Commissioners around process:

Whose opinion will be sought:

A. Local Leadership- government, business, nonprofit, education, healthcare, faith community, civic and community service agencies and boards (including EDC)

And:

B. Avery County Full-time residents

Or:

C. Avery County Property Owners regardless of residential status

Or:

D. All property owners

And?:

E. + business owners with operations in Avery County

Questions for survey:

1. Name, physical address, mailing address, email address

2. What are the characteristics of Avery County that are most important to you? (Choose all that apply)

A. Climate

B. Natural beauty/outdoor recreation opportunities

D. Quiet and seclusion

E. Small-town feel

F. Friendly people

- G. Feeling of safety
- H. Local businesses
- I. Quality of education
- J. Quality of medical care
- K. Work opportunities
- L. Other: _____

3. What do you feel Avery County should be: (Choose all that apply)

- A. A quiet peaceful community
- B. A thriving tourism destination
- C. An innovative agricultural community
- D. A stable environment for families to raise children
- E. An economic engine for the region with strong job/income growth potential
- F. A second-home community with a service industry economy
- G. Other: _____

4. What is your feeling toward growth and development in Avery County? (Choose one)

- A. Strongly support residential growth and business growth
- B. Support carefully managed growth
- C. Support business growth but not population growth
- D. Support population growth but not business growth
- E. Opposed to growth and development of any type

5. What do you feel are weaknesses in Avery County? (Choose all that apply)

- A. Seasonal economy
- B. Population growth
- C. Population decline
- D. Aging population

- E. Insufficient entertainment options
- F. Insufficient dining/retail options
- G. Insufficient public transportation options
- H. Insufficient Road system
- I. Insufficient internet
- J. Insufficient cell phone service
- K. Lack of affordable housing
- L. Lack of well-paying jobs
- M. Loss of family farms/farmland

Other:

6. Overall, how do you rate your quality of life in Avery County? (Please choose one)

- A. High
- B. Moderate
- C. Low

7. What types of businesses would you like to see encouraged to locate/expand in Avery County? (Choose all that apply)

- A. Construction trades
- B. Agricultural operations
- C. Shopping and Retail businesses
- D. Light manufacturing
- E. Heavy manufacturing
- F. Health Care services
- G. Educational services
- H. Childcare/Eldercare
- I. Hospitality, lodging and travel
- J. Restaurants and nightlife
- K. Arts, entertainment and culture
- L. Sports and recreation

M. Utilities

N. Internet and computer services

O. Insurance, legal services

P. Banking, accounting, investment and tax services

Q. Marketing, Advertising, news and media

R. Other: _____

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your community will benefit from your thoughts.