

Avery County Economic Development Committee
January 26, 2021
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on January 26, 2021 at Avery County Administrative Complex, located at 175 Linville Street, Newland, NC 28657.

Present for the meeting in person were:

Phillip Barrier (County Manager), Ken Walter and Susan Siirila

Present for the meeting via online tele-conference were:

Melynda Pepple, Jerry Moody, Kate Gavenus, Eric Berg, Clayton Harpold and Angie Berry

Member absent: Dave Smith

Ken Walter began the meeting by welcoming new EDC member Angie Berry. He called the meeting to order at 5:01 p.m. and stated that we did have a quorum present.

(1) Approve and/or amend the October 27, 2020 meeting minutes:

Clayton Harpold moved to accept the minutes as presented. Melynda Pepple seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

(2) Election of officers for the 2021 calendar year:

A. Chairperson

Clayton Harpold nominated Ken Walter for the position of Chairperson. Eric Berg seconded the nomination. No discussion occurred. The vote was unanimous in favor of Ken Walter for the position of Chairperson.

B. Vice-Chairperson

Jerry Moody nominated Clayton Harpold for the position of Vice-Chairperson. Eric Berg seconded the nomination. No discussion occurred. The vote was unanimous in favor of Clayton Harpold for the position of Vice-Chairperson.

C. Secretary

Eric Berg nominated Susan Siirila for the position of Secretary. Clayton Harpold seconded the nomination. No discussion occurred. The vote was unanimous in favor of Susan Siirila for the position of Secretary.

(3) Unfinished Business

A. Website Development Project status update – Ken Walter reported that all the necessary data has been forwarded to website developer Boomer Sassmann at Big Boom Designs. He stated that good cooperation has occurred between all involved with the project even though the amount of data has at times seemed overwhelming. Ken Walter stated that he has asked Mr. Sassmann for a budget amount on the project by Friday (January 29, 2021). Mr. Walter indicated that he is scheduled to

appear before the Avery County Board of Commissioners, and hopes to be able to present cost/budget information at that time. He stated that at the March meeting, if we get approval from the Board of Commissioners, we may be able to give the go ahead to Boomer Sassmann to move forward with the website development project.

Jerry Moody made a motion for the EDC to approve the website development project. Clayton Harpold seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was passed unanimously. Mr. Walter will present the data therein to the Avery County Board of Commissioners. He will advise the Board of Commissioners of the cost of the project if it is received from Mr. Sassman before the Commissioners meet. If the cost estimate has not been received by that time the information will be relayed to the Board of Commissioners when available.

B. Kate Gavenus – Mainstreet America in Newland status/progress update:
No new data to report.

(4) Phillip Barrier updates & new Bojangles building progress status:

Phillip Barrier thanked the EDC for the work and effort the group has shown. Even though Covid-19 has caused issues, work has continued to move forward.

Mr. Barrier reported that footers have been poured for the new Bojangles building. He stated that a new O'Reily Auto Parts store has been approved, and that both Bojangles and the new auto parts store will be inside the Newland city limits. He noted that the Elk River Depot Restaurant is open and doing well (located at the former Times Square Diner building).

Mr. Barrier reported that he had received sales tax data through December, and that sales tax income was up 27.64% over last year.

Mr. Barrier reported that according to the Avery County Inspection Department, we have had record breaking activity in terms of permits for new construction.

To date, the total for January 2020 through January 2021 is \$122,000,000.00; the total was \$79,000,000.00 during the previous year.

Mr. Barrier stated that Structall is still on their way, but that Covid-19 and work-force issues have slowed their progress.

Mr. Barrier gave accolades to all county departments for the tremendous job they have done with the administration of Covid-19 vaccines. He noted that 1,985 vaccines were given in a two-week period. He concluded by stating that when Avery County can get the vaccines, we can get them administered.

Mr. Barrier reported that the Avery County Chamber of Commerce received the ARC grant, which totals \$100,000.00.

(5) Newland strip mall property development status:

Ken Walter shared information from Site Selection Magazine, which reports that North Carolina ranks as the nation's top business climate state in 2020, in a two-way tie with Georgia. North Carolina held the number 2 spot in the magazine's annual business climates study for five straight years before rising to the top spot in 2020. North Carolina enjoyed a six-year run in the top spot from 2005 through 2010.

(6) New Business and/or other issues to address:

A. EDC support of a county Occupancy tax:

Kate Gavenus stated that for the Town of Beech Mountain, the occupancy tax has more than doubled from last year. Eric Berg asked if there were specific directives for the use of occupancy tax money--if the funds could be directed for use toward promotion of the area for tourism. Ms. Gavenus answered affirmatively. She stated that occupancy tax use is determined by a group of people seeking occupancy tax money, and that they can give directives on use of the funding. She stated that as far as the Town of Beech Mountain goes, that 1/3 of the money can be allocated for tourism related projects and the remaining 2/3 can be used for tourism marketing. Ms. Gavenus suggested that Avery County could appoint a legislative task force, and ask for some of the money received through the occupancy tax to be added to the general fund. She stated that in terms of marketing, the usages can be broad. Mr. Walter asked if some of the money could flow through the EDC for marketing. Ms. Gavenus stated that it could, as the Town of Beech Mountain does the same thing with co-mingling of funding in one pot of money.

B. Ken Updated & improved EDC website "Resource Directory" page:

Ken Walter stated that our current EDC resource page has been updated and that it is up and running.

C. Eric Berg – presentation follow-up re: quality of life and tourist investments:

Eric Berg did not give a presentation. Ken Walter stated that at a future meeting, where all members could attend, Mr. Berg could give a presentation.

(7) Agricultural sub-Committee Report:

Ken Walter suggested that the EDC consider making an in-kind donation as a show of commitment on the part of Avery County to the kill-chill project. Jerry Moody stated that funding for the project has been made available through the Tobacco Trust fund. Preparation for the second part of the proposal has begun, including seeking support for the project from surrounding counties. He stated that farmers have already begun to provide information on the number of producers that may take advantage of a kill-chill facility, including farmers and hobbyists. Jerry Moody stated that the Agricultural Extension office may provide and promote services such as making trailers available to transport livestock to the facility. Also, they may provide classes on meat handling. There will be opportunities for smaller producers to get their products out to consumers, which will add value to the products. Mr. Moody compared retail to wholesale prices for meat products. He stated that the building which will house the facility will be located near the landfill (Watauga County). Discussion occurred regarding how the Avery County EDC could show support for the project. Ken Walter asked, if we provide funding, if we could indicate a preference on how the money could be used. Mr. Moody stated that we could request that the funding be earmarked for the purchase of equipment, or perhaps for marketing. Mr. Moody stated that neither the County of Watauga, nor the High Country Council of Governments will oversee the project. A private entity will oversee the project.

Kate Gavenus made a motion that the EDC support the kill-chill project by making a \$500.00 donation. Clayton Harpold seconded the motion. Discussion occurred. Phillip Barrier raised concerns regarding the fact that the High Country Council of Governments would not oversee the project, as well as concerns regarding the

location of the facility in Watauga County. Mr. Barrier suggested that the matter of a donation toward the project be tabled until more information is available. Ms. Gavenus rescinded her motion, and the matter was tabled until a later date.

(8) Residential Housing sub-Committee:

Eric Berg made a motion that the Housing sub-Committee be closed. Melynda Pepple seconded. Discussion occurred. Phillip Barrier stated that affordable housing is an issue that is not only county and statewide, but that it is a national issue. He stated that it is a greater issue than a committee may be able to address. Upon the vote, the motion was approved unanimously.

(9) Education sub-Committee:

Ken Walter stated that there was no report. Since Covid-19 issues continue to exist, the Junior Achievement project is still on hold.

(10) Marketing sub-Committee:

Melynda Pepple stated that the Avery County Chamber of Commerce Business Guide will be out next week, and that more ads had been sold this year than in years past. She stated that the Chamber has 36 more members since last year, with 4 being added in January 2021.

(11) Future discussion and/or topics:

Discussion occurred regarding possible topics for future meetings.

The next meeting is scheduled for February 23, 2021.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 5:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila