

Avery County Economic Development Committee
February 23, 2021
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on February 23, 2021 at Avery County Administrative Complex, located at 175 Linville Street, Newland, NC 28657.

Present for the meeting in person were:

Ken Walter, Chairperson and Susan Siirila, Secretary

Present for the meeting via online tele-conference were:

Melynda Pepple, Jerry Moody, Kate Gavenus, Eric Berg, Clayton Harpold and Dave Smith

Members absent: Angie Berry, Phillip Barrier, County Manager.

Ken Walter called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. and stated that we did have a quorum present.

(1) Approve and/or amend the January 26, 2021 meeting minutes:
Clayton Harpold moved to accept the minutes as presented. Jerry Moody seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

(2) Unfinished Business:

A. Ken Walter: Progress Report on Website Development Project
Ken Walter reported that we are awaiting a cost, or price, updated from Boomer Sassmann, of Big Boom Designs, today. He reported that much work has been accomplished on the project already. A test site is up and running, so that we may begin to amend the data on the website. Mr. Walter stated that Phillip Barrier, County Manager and Dennis Aldridge, County Commissioner, were not available to attend the EDC meeting on this date due to a schedule conflict.

B. Kate Gavenus, Main Street America: Ms. Gavenus stated that the Main Street America project is not running any cycles at this time due to the pandemic.

C. Eric Berg, Quality of Life and Tourism Report: Mr. Berg will present his report when all team members can be present.

(3) Phillip Barrier Updates:

In Mr. Barrier's stead, Mr. Walter reported that construction on the Bojangles building continues. He noted that O'Reilly's Auto Parts stores has announced that they will open a store in Newland. It will be located in the old Avery Journal Building, beside Avery Tire. Structall is still underway, and will be moving into the old IRC building.

(4) Dave Smith re: Newland strip mall property development status: Mr. Smtih noted that several projects are still underway. He stated that he is aware of one new business coming to Avery County, and he is scheduled to meet with others to continue to work toward bringing more businesses to the area.

Ken Walter added that he has become aware of a potential new business start-up called Ridge Runner Junk Removal. This business will offer the service of pick up/haul off of household materials. The owner has stated an intent to donate items that may still be usable. Mr. Walter has referred the new business owner to Allen Cooke at Mayland Community College's Small Business Center.

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

A. EDC support of a county Occupancy Tax

Ken Walter opened the floor for comments or suggestions. Kate Gavenus suggested that the EDC support pursuit of a county occupancy tax. She stated that with VRBO and AirB&B opportunities in the area, that an occupancy tax would represent "money on the table" and gave examples of how the Town of Beech Mountain benefits from their occupancy tax. Dave Smith agreed that it was worth pursuing, and asked for information about how occupancy tax funds could be used. Ms. Gavenus responded, and stated that generally, the TDA (Tourism Development Authority) directs

how such funds are used, and disburses the money where it needs to go. She stated that there must be a legislative bill to support an occupancy tax. Ms. Gavenus gave examples of how different areas utilize occupancy tax revenue. In Oak Island, NC, the revenue goes into the general fund. The Town of Beech Mountain utilizes their occupancy tax revenue for tourism related projects and marketing. The scope of these areas can be broad. She stated that the TDA would be a separate board set up by the County Commissioners, and that generally 3% of occupancy tax revenue is used for administrative costs. For example, Avery County might utilize 3% of occupancy tax revenue to hire a part time employee to administer the program.

Dave Smith made a motion that the Avery County EDC support approval of a county occupancy tax. Clayton Harpold seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was passed unanimously.

Ken Walter stated that he would make the County Commissioners aware of our position.

(6) Agricultural sub-Committee Report:

Ken Walter stated that he had prepared a letter of support for the Kill-Chill project. The letter has been approved and is now our official position statement. The letter was shared with EDC members by email. Jerry Moody reported that the Kill-Chill project was moving forward. Grant money has been applied for through the Tobacco Trust Fund and the USDA Rural Building Fund. Additional funding may be secured through the REDLG (Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program). This program provides loans up to 30 years in duration at 1% interest. The County of Watauga will be the lease holder, and the High Country County of Governments will assist with the project as well. The Kill-Chill facility will allow cattle to be slaughtered there and either processed on site, or moved to other areas for processing. The benefit will be that farmers will not have to travel to take cattle to be slaughtered and will not have to schedule slaughter times far in advance. Mr. Moody said that the project will not hurt anyone else presently in the business of slaughtering and processing animals.

(7) Education sub-Committee Report:

Ken Walter indicated that due to Covid-19 the Junior Achievement program

is still on hold.

(8) Marketing sub-Committee Report:

Melynda Pepple stated that the new Chamber of Commerce Business Guide is printed and available. Mr. Walter added that the placement of the EDC advertisement in the business guide looks great.

(9) Future discussion and/or action topics:

Ken Walter stated that the Employee Retention Workshop should still be considered as a project for the EDC to pursue once Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. Also, resumption of the Junior Achievement program should occur.

The next meeting is scheduled for March 30, 2021.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 5:28 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila