

Avery County Economic Development Committee
March 30, 2021
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on March 30, 2021 at the Avery County Administrative Complex, located at 175 Linville Street, Newland, NC 28657 and by tele-conference.

Present for the meeting in person were:

Phillip Barrier (County Manager), Ken Walter, Susan Siirila and guests Hallie Willis of Mountain Community Bank and Anne Winkleman of the Avery County Chamber of Commerce.

Present for the meeting via online tele-conference were:

Dave Smith, Jerry Moody, Kate Gavenus, Eric Berg, Clayton Harpold, Dennis Aldridge (County Commissioner) and Angie Berry

Member absent: Melynda Pepple

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

(1) Approve and/or amend the February 23, 2021 meeting minutes:

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

(2) Unfinished Business

A. Website Development Project status update – Ken Walter reported that work on the website development project had continued, and that he had received an email from Boomer Sassmann (Big Boom Designs) earlier in the day. He will share the contents thereof with team members later. All changes to the website have been made. Mr. Sassmann will go ahead and load changes to the Chamber of Commerce website. Visitors to the site can stay on the Avery County page or link to the Chamber of Commerce site.

B. Kate Gavenus Main Street America – No report.

C. Eric Berg – Report to be given when group can meet in person.

(3) Phillip Barrier – Updates

Phillip Barrier reported that progress continues on Bojangles. They are currently working on water and sewer installation. Regarding O'Reilly's Auto Parts, the property has been sold, but permits have not been issued yet. The construction will be done by Abbott Construction from Asheville. Mr. Barrier stated that he expects construction to go very quickly.

Ken Walter asked about logos and/or decals (window stickers). Mr. Barrier reported that the company the county purchases such supplies from is overwhelmed. Anne

Winkleman and Susan Siirila will send Mr. Barrier information on companies which produce similar products.

Ken Walter reported that he had participated in a webinar with Retail Strategies, a company based in Alabama. The webinar addressed how communities attract businesses. Mr. Walter provided the presenters with a description of the Lowes Foods/strip mall area in Newland. He then participated in a Zoom meeting with a representative. The basic data that came out of the meeting was that a community needs to have a positive profit expectation figure related to possible retail marketing; Newland has a negative supermarket profit expectation figure. It was noted that we have contacted several supermarkets with no good results, which is understandable, as most have very specific guidelines regarding the communities they will locate to. Retail Strategies offers a training program for individuals directly involved in the process of marketing a community. Dave Smith has gotten a copy of the training material. The cost of the training program is high (approximately \$10,000.00 per participant), but funding through sponsorship to attend the program may be available through the American Rescue Plan. Through this program, states will get funding. Funding would come from the state to use for one or more representatives to attend the training program. Additional discussion occurred regarding possible funding for attendance at the training program. Dave Smith reported that he has contacted the mayor of Crystal Springs, Mississippi, Sally Garland, who had attended the training program noted above. He received very positive feedback from Ms. Garland, who highly recommended the program. Mr. Smith clarified that the training cost is \$10,000.00 per participant through Zoom online training or \$12,000.00 for up to 3 participants. Ken Walter added that if we were to have one or more representatives trained through the program, it would benefit the whole county, not just Newland. Mr. Smith stated that up to three (3) people can participate. The agency that offers the training has a group scheduled for April 1, 2021 through May 13, 2021. There will be other group training sessions after that, but they have not been scheduled yet. He noted that funding for the training may be available through the Brownsfield Grant (EPA). Phillip Barrier stated that we should look at grant opportunities, and then present the matter to the County Commissioners. Dennis Aldridge indicated that he had many questions which would need to be addressed before moving forward. He pointed out that the group offering the training are in business to make money and that we need to insure we are not training on material that we already know. Mr. Smith agreed that more investigation on the training would be good. Ken Walter and Phillip Barrier can present findings to the County Commissioners. Additionally, Dave Smith will talk with representatives from Retail Strategies for information on what businesses look for in terms of locating to a small town and have them help put a list together. Dave Smith stated that data on the Recovery Act and what we may be able to secure in the way of funding can be reviewed at a later meeting. He is awaiting a call back from the mayor of Bannockburn, South Carolina.

Ken Walter shared information on a story from Tennessee Magazine regarding a small town coffee shop entrepreneurial success story.

- (4) Susan Siirila – Pineola Inn Sale/Changes
- Dave Smith – Newland Strip Mall Development

Ken Walter – Bent Pine Hollow, Chris Zecca and Pisgah Picnics, Mary Vasgaard Susan Siirila reported that the Pineola Inn had recently been purchased by Carolyn Johnson. Ms. Johnson is currently planning renovations to the motel and office building. She plans to put in a lounge and tap room. Ms. Johnson also acquired approximately 13 acres behind the motel. She has a long-range plan to develop that into an RV storage area.

Dave Smith reported no changes on the Newland Strip Mall area but noted that a possible sale is still in the works.

Ken Walter reported that he has spoken with Mary Vasgaard, who may begin a business called Pisgah Picnics. She is working with representatives of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Mr. Walter has referred her to Allen Cooke, Small Business Center Director of Mayland Community College.

Allen Cooke has referred Chris Zecca to Mr. Walter. His proposed business is a “glamping” experience, which would be located at Bent Pine Hollow in Banner Elk. Mr. Walter facilitated a meeting between Mr. Zecca and Town of Banner Elk manager Rick Owen, which was positive. Also, Mr. Zecca has met with Paul Buchanan, Avery County Fire Marshall. Mr. Walter stated that the partnership between Allen Cooke and our EDC continues to be a very constructive alliance.

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

A. Address the possibility of advertising on Ray’s Weather website – Ken Walter briefly reviewed the prices for advertising on the website (see rates on agenda). Anne Winkleman, Avery County Chamber of Commerce, stated that she could provide click data collected by the chamber which we could use in making a decision about said advertising. Ken Walter reported that Melynda Pepple will be leaving the Avery County Chamber of Commerce and going to a job at Grandfather Golf and Country Club. Guests Anne Winkleman and Hallie Willis shared information about themselves and their experiences with the Avery County Chamber of Commerce. Both indicated a willingness to help the EDC as they could in helping to bring businesses to Avery County.

B. The EDC terms of both Melynda Pepple and Eric Berg will expire in May 2021. Anne Winkleman and Eric Berg both intend to submit EDC applications and Cindy Turbyfill will also be advertising these two EDC vacancies.

(6) Agricultural sub-committee report – Jerry Moody

A. News and/or updated information on the kill & chill project – Jerry Moody reported that a grant request has been submitted to the Golden LEAF Foundation where approval looks promising. In addition, a contingent grant request was submitted to the Tobacco Trust for \$220,000.00 to be used to equip the facility. On Friday, Feb. 26, we submitted a proposal to the USDA Rural Business Development Grant Program for North Carolina for an additional \$150,000 to supplement the Golden LEAF funding proposal and the Tobacco Trust Fund proposal for additional equipment needs to enhance automation and efficiency at the proposed facility. The county would be the fiscal agent for that one, as well. It is important to note that the Golden LEAF proposed funding is the key piece with these grant efforts. If Golden LEAF funding is not approved (award announcement will be the first week of April), we will withdraw both the Tobacco Trust Fund and the USDA proposal.

Next, the project leaders would seek USDA Rural Business Development grant monies, which could provide up to \$150,000.00 to complete the project and get the facility up and

running. Mr. Moody reviewed the wait time for producers who wish to get their animals processed. He stated that the bottleneck created by Covid is still an issue. Discussion occurred regarding the possibilities associated with the sale of locally grown beef and pork products in local restaurants and the positive impact of programs such as FFA and keeping young farmers in the Avery County area.

Phillip Barrier stated that there has been a push to vaccinate a diverse population in the county. He stated that many Latino workers in the county have been vaccinated and that 90% of agricultural workers have been vaccinated. He stated that Avery County is a leader in first dose vaccinations and that 28.5 percent of our population has been vaccinated.

Phillip Barrier stated that Structall (manufacturing plant) is still on the way.

(7) Education sub-committee report: Susan, Dave & Ken – No report.

Ken Walter stated that the Avery County Clean Sweep project had been a success. He noted that former EDC member Jesse Pope of Grandfather Mountain Stewardship had originated the program. Mr. Walter suggested that an anti-litter campaign may be a project that the EDC could work on. The possibility of presenting to school age children was reviewed. Mr. Walter stated that he hoped that Dr. Brigman, Avery County School Superintendent, would agree to such a program. Mr. Barrier stated that the DARE program was back in schools, and that he remembered a campaign slogan “give a hoot, don’t pollute” from years ago. He suggested that a similar program at this time would be favorable.

Mr. Barrier stated that on April 1, 2021 we would learn if funding would be approved through the ARC grant for internet broadband expansion. This would provide \$100,000.00 plus matching funds. This amount would not cover all broadband needs, but it would help. He stated that some funding for broadband may be available from the state via the American Rescue Plan Act.

Ken Walter thanked guests Anne Winkleman and Hallie Willis for their participation in the meeting. He adjourned the meeting at 6:10 p.m.

The next meeting is scheduled for April 27, 2021

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila