

Avery County Economic Development Committee
April 27, 2021
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on April 27, 2021 at the Avery County Administrative Complex, located at 175 Linville Street, Newland, NC 28657

Present for the meeting were:

Phillip Barrier (County Manager), Ken Walter, Susan Siirila, Dave Smith, Kate Gavenus, Eric Berg, Clayton Harpold, Dennis Aldridge (County Commissioner) Anne Winkleman and Angie Berry

Member absent: Jerry Moody

Ken Walter called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

(1) Approve and/or amend the March 30, 2021 meeting minutes:

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

(2) Unfinished Business

A. Website Development Project status update – Ken Walter reported that he had communicated with Alex Gavenus and Avery Chamber of Commerce representative Anne Winkleman, and that their ideas on completion of the website project put it “over the top.” He pointed out some examples such as the resource directory being made interactive. In the final step, Dennis Holland and Ken Walter have discussed a plan where one may click on the Economic Development link, and then be taken to a referral page on the Chamber of Commerce site. The menu will remain as is. Dennis Holland is working to see if that is something he can do, or the group that originally designed the Avery County website would need to be consulted. Once this is determined, Mr. Holland will seek approval from the county manager to proceed. This will be in keeping with the agreement made with the Avery County Commissioners that the site will remain the same, but that there would be an easy “one click” for visitors that would take them to the Chamber of Commerce site.

County Manager Phillip Barrier advised that there were some changes and omissions that he would discuss later, such as the omission of the Town of Crossnore.

Ken Walter indicated that we have a standing offer from Alex Gavenus to add or change material on the website, he will do without charging additional fees. This would be preferable to going back to Boorner Sassmann of Big Boom Designs, whose fees are \$95.00 per hour.

B. Mainstreet America - Kate Gavenus

No report. The program is still on hold due to Covid.

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

Mr. Berg began his presentation by stating that our (EDC) charter is to keep business here and to attract new business. He stated that if one takes it one step further, resources matter as a pre-requisite. Part of the resources are people. Today, we find that many people can work from wherever they are. One of the requirements is internet availability. People need fast internet, reasonable communication, etc. Then, what is "life" like? Questions arise such as "Is it good for my family and what I like?" Thereafter, we see relocation. Mr. Berg referred back to the memo he had shared with the group earlier (see attachment). Mr. Berg stated that he had included in his written data material that he gathered from talking to people, and from having guests in his house and asking them questions. He stated that in terms of Economic Development, we needed to look not only at the business component, but the reasons people may move here because of their preferences, nature, etc. He stated that different people have different expectations. He reviewed items of interest in our area which may attract individuals to move to this area, and items which needed additional focus and improvement in order to attract individuals to the area. For example, in discussing amenities, he noted that we need more in the way of activities for children, such as soccer. Also, he indicated that the Rock Gym is available, but could offer more in terms of programs and activities which might serve a broader community such as the Hispanic community. Mr. Berg reviewed a program in Virginia called "Rails to Trails" which turns old railroad beds into walking trails. He stated that a review of the Medicaid Expansion bill is a matter which should be addressed. He also noted that the litter problem in our area needs to be addressed, and that a local initiative needs to come about to look at the litter problem. Discussion occurred regarding the issue of littering in the county. Phillip Barrier shared information regarding the state's litter sweep program. State workers are currently in the county doing a litter sweep. He stated that in 2020, because of Covid and budget constraints, the state only visited Avery County once. Each time an individual buys a gallon of gas, he/she is paying a tax to the state which goes to NCDOT. Part of this funds mowing and litter sweeps. Dennis Aldridge shared information regarding other ways that are being investigated to fund such programs, and that NCDOT has not always been the best stewards of the funding made available to them. Discussion occurred regarding the "Adopt a Highway" program, which is still a viable program. Phillip Barrier indicated that Avery County had applied for and been denied funding for trail building, which was slated to fund the building of a trail from the Agricultural Building to the Avery County Humane Society. The grant proposal will be reviewed and rewritten by individuals at High Country Council of Governments. It will be resubmitted thereafter.

The discussion on the matter of litter in the county resumed. Ken Walter shared information resulting from conversations with Dr. Brigman of Avery County Schools, who is agreeable to information programs for school youth regarding litter. Also, Jesse Pope of Grandfather Mountain Stewardship has been, and will continue to be, active in litter education programs. Grandfather Mountain may do a video which can be used to educate youth about littering. Ken Walter shared an example of how youth directed educational programs about littering can affect change, as he personally saw in Puerto Rico some years ago. Through this program, he saw youth educating adults. Dennis Aldridge expressed concerns regarding the fact that the issue of littering may be greater than, or different than, matters which should be addressed by the EDC. Mr. Berg completed his presentation by talking about aesthetic appeal which may be improved by addressing litter clean up.

D. Dave Smith: Retail Strategies continuing retail marketing education program.

Dave Smith reported that he has continued his follow-up with Retail Strategies and that he has secured testimonials about their academic programs. He reminded the team that the expense of training through Retail Strategies was discussed at the last meeting. He stated that every person he has spoken to, from Florida, Iowa, Mississippi and Alabama, who have attended the training has given a positive review. The individual in Florida he spoke with cited Retail Strategies training giving a direct effect of bringing three new businesses to their area. Plus, they have two more that are scheduled to locate in their area. Mr. Smith stated that the biggest take away from his talks with individuals about Retail Strategies was their professionalism and the data they provide. They may teach us how to talk with potential businesses and learn what interests them and what they are looking for. Mr. Smith stated that he felt it would be worth the money for representatives from Avery County to participate in Retail Strategies training. Angie Berry asked about the difference between Retail Strategies and a consulting firm based on costs. Dave Smith stated that there were no guarantees, and that a consulting firm may cost more. He stated that if we were to hire Retail Strategies to accompany us in talks with potential businesses that the costs could range from \$10,000.00 to \$40,000.00. Also, Retail Strategies would offer their continued services after the training was completed. Angie Berry asked whether or not a package was available that we could present businesses who were considering locating to the Avery County area. Mr. Smith stated that an information package had been discussed in the past, but that no such package currently existed. Kate Gavenus shared information regarding an information package which was developed, and was available from, the Town of Beech Mountain and the successes they have had in the way of planning information. She will email copies of the packet to EDC members. Discussion occurred regarding tax incentives and other considerations which may be viewed as incentives to bring industry to the county, including discussion regarding the availability of water and sewer.

Discussion returned to the matter of a litter awareness program (see section C.) Eric Berg stated that he wished to talk with NCDOT and Jesse Pope to find out what it takes to address the litter problem. He stated that he wished to spearhead such a program, as he felt he could not just complain about the issue but needed to do something about it. Ken Walter added that every participant in such a program would be a benefit to the county. Dennis Aldridge responded by stating that we needed to focus on what we could actually do, as opposed to what we would like to do. He stated that the "quality of life issues" were great, but that was not what we (EDC) are charged with. Kate Gavenus pointed out the distinction between community development (the big picture of all that takes place within a community) and economic development (what the group is tasked with doing). Eric Berg stated that as far as infrastructure, employers/businesses could find that anywhere, but what might make them wish to relocate to Avery County may be the "quality of life issues." He stated that the issue may be peripheral. Mr. Aldridge stated that it was not peripheral to the county, but to the EDC committee. Mr. Berg stated that he was not comfortable with the response from Mr. Aldridge. Mr. Aldridge responded by stating that the EDC was not tasked with dealing with cultural issues. Clayton Harpold shared information and concurred with Mr. Aldridge on the assertion that EDC was not tasked with cultural issues. Additional discussion occurred regarding the role of the EDC. The discussion concluded with Ms. Gavenus re-stating the difference between community development and economic development. Mr. Barrier stated that the issue of litter awareness will be addressed by Avery County Solid Waste, Jesse Pope (Grandfather Mountain) and Dr. Brigman (Avery County Schools), and that the EDC group did not need to be involved.

E. Advertising on Ray's Weather website – Ken Walter

No report.

F. Other

(3) Phillip Barrier updates and other news re: Bojangles, O'Reilly Auto Parts, etc.
Availability of Avery County Logo decals? Other new business news:

Mr. Barrier reported that a resolution has been sent to the North Carolina General Assembly to pursue an occupancy tax in Avery County. Mr. Barrier reported that Bojangles is very close to opening, but like other employers are feeling the effects of the nationwide labor shortage. He stated that McDonalds' dining room was closed due to lack of staff. He asked Susan Siirila for her input on where staffing would come from for summer seasonal jobs. She responded by stating that unemployment insurance extensions were slated to run until September 2021, and that in her opinion, individuals would not return to work until after the extended benefits program ends. Mr. Barrier stated concerns about how service industries would continue to stay in business without available workers. All other committee members agreed. Dennis Aldridge reviewed statistical data which came from Juvenile Crime Prevention Council, which he is on. Some of the statistical data related to census numbers and unemployment percentages. He stated that in February 2021, the Avery County unemployment rate was 4.9%, and the statewide rate was 5.6%.

Dave Smith re: Newland strip mall property development status:

No report.

Ken Walter re: Bent Pine Hollow, Chris Zecca

Ken Walter stated that he and Allen Cooke (Mayland Community College) were continuing to work with Chris Zecca on the "glamping" project. He shared an email which he received from Mr. Zecca and stated that he feels positive that the project will move forward. Mr. Walter re-stated the importance of providing support to businesses looking to locate in Avery County.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:18 p.m.

The next meeting is scheduled for May 25, 2021.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila



Search mail

Compose

Inbox

Starred

Snoozed

Sent

Drafts

Church

EDC

Edward Jones

Orbit

Save

Stuff to Save

Meet

New meeting

Join a meeting

Hangouts

Susan

Call phones feature is not available.
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Below is an earlier emails that I sent in prep for the earlier scheduled pr was acted upon with success. See you at 5.

Best Regards

STAY SAFE

Eric Berg

This is the september email to Ken;

I like to share the input from interviews from recreation/tourism and rese

So I do not create too much controversy here is my outline;

- HOUSING AVAILABILITY
 - 5,000 Owner-occupied housing is 30% and stable,
 - Long term Rentals at \$750/mon
 - New demand high end.
- NEW CONSTRUCTION
 - Rental 1,500 sq ft requires an income of \$43k/yr.
 - Tax breaks, land, subsidies needed

RECREATION/TOURISM

- Interviews politely diplomatic
 - No help needed – knows best
 - Need infrastructure; traffic, maintenance/litter, esthetics
 - Towns want to Keep occupancy tax
 - Self-control

NEW RESIDENTS' REASONS AND EXPECTATIONS (Personal conclu

- + Climate
- + Nature
- + Safety, Low crime
- + HS and Mayland
- + Cannon Hospital
- + Location; proximity to population centers (- roads)
- + Fishing, Hunting, Hiking
- + AT and Blue Ridge PKWY

INFRASTRUCTURE EXPECTATIONS



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My discussion about TWEETSIE railroad grade conversion to a bike and

I suggest these programs to improve Avery Quality of Life. These invest
I am basing this on the assumption that our goal is to be attractive young

- Full county broadband coverages
 - License suppliers requiring coverage to operate. No "chen
- Incremental implementation of a TWEETSIE bike/walking path
- Soccer and baseball fields. Potential use for Summer tournament
 - Public outside basketball courts also at schools.
 - Rock gym is overcapacity on weekends and at league play
- Keep pushing for better road capacity and better safety especially
 - It would also be good to have road noise abatement
- Road litter and grooming programs.
 - Chamber to lead a program for businesses to be shown a
 - Litter pickup events sponsored by NGO's like churches an
- Residence code enforcement; If new construction must meet code
 - Aggressive "Shame and Help" program for property clean
- We have 700 hard-working Avery residents who cannot afford he
like a grant which will also help our hospital with PAYING patients
- Public ATV trails

We are a rich County but we do not act like it. Compare us to an eastern
pay sales tax and in some areas occupancy tax. I believe we can afford

- Occupancy tax in "open" areas of our county. This tax might be re
- At least a .25% addition to the sales tax, with a strong promotion
 - Day visitors, Vacationers, Floridians, and tourists will pay i
- Our property tax rate is at least half of what I have paid in other k
 - Based on the property (values) owned by 70% non-reside
 - Like all tax increases, they must be related to the r

I recommend that we discuss these points piecemeal in our meetings ar

Be safe
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