

Avery County Economic Development Committee
June 28, 2022

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 p.m. June 28, 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, Clayton Harpold, Anne Winkleman, Jerry Moody, Terri Melton, Dave Smith, Ellis Ayers, Kate Gavenus, Phillip Barrier, Avery County Manager, Dan Williams, Guest and Lily Kincaid, Avery Journal Newspaper

Members absent: Edward Dean

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

1. Welcome new EDC member Ellis Ayers, Director of Secondary Education & CTE at Avery County Schools. The Avery County Commissioners approved Mr. Ayers appointment to the EDC and approved reappointment of current EDC members Susan Siirila and Kate Gavenus.

2. Approve and/or amend the May 31, 2022 minutes
Clayton Harpold made a motion to accept the minutes as presented. Terri Melton seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

3. Unfinished Business

A. Ken Walter to report on our June 9, 2022 "Finding, Keeping and Motivating Workers Workshop." Update on Feedback Survey sent to each of the individuals who attended in person.

Ken Walter thanked Susan Siirila for her efforts on preparing for the workshop, including preparation of the handout, organizing, and recruiting for the event. EDC members shared their thoughts and comments about the workshop, which were all favorable. On June 16, 2022, Mr. Walter sent out a survey via email to workshop attendees. Emails went out to 32 individuals. Two emails came back as blocked, one was an invalid or non-usable email address, so basically 29 attendees received the survey by email. Mr. Walter reported that eight responses came in. He reviewed the questions and responses on the survey. Respondents were asked for topics for future workshops. Some of their answers included a workshop on implementation of internships, employer resources, county development plans, affordable housing solutions for entry level employees, building your workplace through apprenticeships, generational differences with regard to worker motivation, motivating employees in today's workforce/teambuilding, attitudes in the workplace/getting along with fellow employees

in the workplace. The group agreed that other such presentations or workshops would be good projects to pursue in the future.

Guest Dan Williams joined the meeting. Mr. Williams works for Quester Real Estate, a multi-faceted real estate firm. Mr. Williams gave a short overview of his business and personal life. He shared that he is passionate about tourism and offered to bring what he could to the EDC group.

B. Kate Gavenus to report on New Business Guide Toolbox project and survey. Ms. Gavenus reported that we should be able to move forward on the Toolbox project in July once the expenditures are approved. The Toolbox will be an economic development Toolbox where we take some of our incentives that the county can do without a lot of stress and offer incentives to help people either expand or begin new businesses. To do that, the piece that we do not have is to know exactly what businesses this county wants. It is more than what we need, but what does the populace that is here actually want us to have and what direction to take. To complete the matrices that give the county manager and county commissioners a way to rank proposals to them, we need to make a list of what people want and quantify that data. We are getting ready to gather the information we need. Data collection will be a key piece and we will resume gathering the information we need in a few weeks. Ken Walter reminded the group that a public hearing must be held to approve the expenditure (EDC's portion of the budget). He stated that one of his passions for Avery County continues to be for young people to be able to stay in the county when they graduate or to come back and be successful in business.

C. Phillip Barrier to report on the Occupancy Tax status and county budget progress. Mr. Barrier reported that the bill has passed the N.C. House and has gone to the senate. There are many items attached to the bill, some which come from other counties. There is a problem with the Town of Wilmington which may slow down the progression of the bill. Kate Gavenus stated that she planned a bill which could be presented in the long session. The possibility exists for the Avery County occupancy tax bill to be attached. She stated that a coalition comprised of TDA representatives will meet in late July. This would give additional time to investigate the possibility of attaching the Avery County occupancy tax issue to the bill which will be presented to the N.C. General Assembly later. Ken Walter asked if Avery, Mitchell and Yancey counties could come together and present a separate bill related to the occupancy tax. Ms. Gavenus stated that the reason to spread the matter among many different groups is that you get more legislators who will vote positively on the issue.

D. Phillip Barrier to report on the allocation in Avery County of the American Recovery Plan funds and any broadband contracts being let as a result of this funding. Mr. Barrier reported that ARP funding is tied up in legal concerns. He stated that Avery County may have to do requests for proposals for broadband (already prepared twice in the past) again. He stated that there is more legislation pending, which will give other directives. This is in addition to the state and federal spending requirements already in

place. He will participate in a meeting on Friday July 1, 2022 to learn more about what Avery County can and cannot do with the funding. The county's goal is to have affordable, reliable internet available throughout the county. This has not happened yet with ARP funding due to red tape.

E. Phillip Barrier to report on any new information/updates re: the new apartment complex at the old Lowes Strip Mall property. Other new business news?

Mr. Barrier reported that with workforce housing and the grant we received from Dogwood Trust, things are in place, its moving along but we are getting where we need to be on the housing assessment and inventory for water and sewer for the towns. Mr. Barrier had a successful meeting with Mayland Community College's president, Dr. Boyd and the county managers of Mitchell and Yancey Counties. Dogwood Trust representatives are excited about loaning money to building student and workforce housing at the Mayland Community College campus at the Avery/Mitchell County line. With Mayland Community College owning the property, it would be non-profit and owned by all three entities. The rental rate would be marked at 30% of the resident's income.

Mr. Barrier stated that the owners of the Lowes Strip Mall property have applied for federal tax grants, that the state gives out.

4. Pending Unfinished Business

A. Avery County High School & Cannon Hospital videos to be scheduled in or after July – included in our 2022-2023 budget at \$1,000.00 each for fiscal year 2022-2023: No report.

5. New Business and/or other issues to address

A. Mayland Community College has a new Small Business Center Director – Morgan Suddreth. Phone (828) 766-1295. Her email is: msuddreth@mayland.edu.

B. Neal Falvey is no longer with the Avery Journal. Lily Kincaid is their new reporter. Ken Walter thanked her for the good work she did reporting on our June 9, 2022 workshop.

6. Avery County Chamber of Commerce – Anne Winkleman

A. Festival updates: Ms. Winkleman reported that SummerFest was excellent. It was the first time the festival had been held and it was a success. She stated that all vendors wish to come back, and the chamber has had more vendors calling about participation in the festival next year. She stated that they plan to expand the festival next year with perhaps a chili cook-off or pie contest or something similar. They will promote "bring a chair or blanket" next year so that visitors may sit and enjoy the entertainment.

The July 4th festivities in Banner Elk will feature duck races, food vendors and old-fashioned games such as a sack race and egg toss. The Fine Arts Festival is currently being planned.

7. Agricultural sub-Committee Report – Jerry Moody

Mr. Moody reported that he participated in a meeting recently at which the issue of new people getting into the tree business was addressed. One of the hinderances is that no bank will give a young person a loan for the amount of money required to get into the tree business. He shared examples of the amount of typical funding needed from planting to harvesting trees. This high cost, coupled with the high cost of land, would be prohibitive. Mr. Moody and his colleagues have looked at ways to get youth involved in growing seedlings which can be sold. Growers have been working toward selling or leasing to someone who will continue in the tree business. It is a matter of working out the details. They are working with the Agricultural Institute in Raleigh to secure course credit for youth who participate in school (course credit for work in the field). NC State University offers a two-year agricultural degree. Some students may benefit from such a program where they could earn course credit for their work. Ellis Ayers added new programs and ideas are always welcome when it comes to helping forge new pathways. The educational support can be shaped to help youth who may want to move in the direction of education in agriculture.

A. News and/or updated information on the kill & chill project news:

Mr. Moody reported that he had spoken with a representative of the kill & chill project about one month ago. They have been given quotes and have gone back to look for more funding. The Watauga County Commissioners support the project. The project could still be very positive for Avery County.

B. Farmland conservancy progress update:

Mr. Moody reported that he continues to work on the project. He invited EDC team members to go on the Farmland Preservation Tour, which happens each year. August 13, 2022 will be when the tour is conducted. There is a fee required for participation. The group will visit three farms: (1) Robert Reece's farm at Beech Mountain, NC, (2) Bonita and D.C. Smith's farm in Banner Elk, NC, and (3) Larry and Lynn Smith's farm in Banner Elk, NC. A meal will be provided by the Beech Mountain community at the conclusion of the tour.

Mr. Moody concluded by reporting that the Avery County Fair will be held September 7th through 10th. A horse pull will be held at the fairgrounds on August 6th. Mr. Moody will purchase equipment for movie screenings, which will facilitate movie nights at the fairgrounds. He reported that this will happen in late July or August. They also plan to do a haunted trail this year.

Phillip Barrier stated that there will be a Tourism Development Authority established when/if we do get the bill for an occupancy tax passed. He advised team members to plan to be asked to possibly serve on that board.

8. Other

Mr. Barrier stated that he has reserved a site on November 4, 2022 for an Avery County Frasier Fir Fair. He will work with Mr. Moody on that project.

The Avery County Museum had their Heritage Fair on the Square. It was well attended, rich with history and many materials for visitors to see.

July 4, 2022 festivities will be held throughout the county.

The Grandfather Mountain Highland Games will start on Thursday July 14, 2022.

Mike Henley, newly elected Sheriff of Avery County, will be sworn in on June 29, 2022.

9. Adjournment

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila