

Avery County Economic Development Committee
June 29, 2021

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on June 29, 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, Kate Gavenus, Clayton Harpold, Angie Berry, Jerry Moody and Terri Melton.

Members absent: Edward Dean and Dave Smith

Guests: Michael Cooper, Duncan Martin, Valerie Jaynes, Mayor of Newland

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

Welcome to Terri Melton as the newest member of the Economic Development Committee.

(1) Approve and/or amend the May 25, 2021 meeting minutes:

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

(2) Guest Speakers

The guest speakers were Mr. Michael Cooper, Shared & Regional Government Affairs Director from the High Country/Near West NC Realtors and Mr. Duncan Martin, CEO, High Country Association of Realtors

The speakers introduced themselves and gave a short statement about their backgrounds and current positions with the High Country Association of Realtors. Ken Walter introduced each EDC member.

Mr. Cooper shared that he had grown up in Wilkes County and that he had completed an undergraduate degree at ASU, followed by completion of law school. He practiced law and thereafter joined the High Country Association of Realtors. He stated that growing up in Wilkes County caused him to be passionate about things like Economic Development in smaller towns and rural areas. He referenced “exporting talent” meaning that we do a good job in this area of educating our young people in the public schools, who then move away and often do not come back. He noted that one of the good things we learned from the pandemic was that people can work from wherever they may be through telework. He stated that a recent survey completed in Research Triangle Park showed that 54% of people wanted to continue working remotely, which many companies may allow. He stated that Avery County is a beautiful area, and specifically mentioned Banner Elk and the surrounding areas. He stated that a goal of the High Country Realtors Association is to keep Avery County affordable as far as housing.

Mr. Cooper then relayed information regarding a grant opportunity available/funded through the National Association of Realtors, called a Smart Growth Grant, a level two grant. It would be a \$5,000.00 grant which would be used to fund a main street development assessment, focusing on small businesses. He stated that he had applied for two of these grant this year-one for Marion in McDowell County and one for Spruce Pine in Mitchell County. Both have been accepted. He said that for both, they would be using a consultant named Hilary Greenberg from Charlotte, NC. He added that if the Town of Newland were to pursue a similar grant, Greenberg would be the consultant that would work with us as well. The grant would be a reimbursement grant, so the High Country Association of Realtors would need a partner agency at the local level to pay the initial cost, then be reimbursed. He stated that typically, the partner agency pays on the front end, and is reimbursed at the completion and that reimbursement generally is back within a short time, usually a week. The partner agency would be required to pay lodging/food and travel costs for Ms. Greenberg for her travel to Newland.

Mr. Cooper stated that based on feedback, Spruce Pine and Marion representatives have said that the program is well worth the cost.

Ms. Greenberg has other local groups in the area in September and October, so Newland could be added when she is in the area assisting other groups.

Mr. Cooper stated that the High Country Association of Realtors has identified a research organization who does county assessments. Ken Walter asked what data would be available as a result of the county assessment. Mr. Cooper indicated that a housing assessment would be included, which would be a big issue in Avery County. Also, we might learn how many commuters we have from other areas, i.e. how many workers commute to/from Tennessee to work in Avery County. He gave the example of nurses, teachers, law enforcement workers being priced out of the local labor market due to a lack of available local housing. This could help us look at how to keep the area affordable. Discussion followed regarding the local housing sales trends from 2020 through today. Currently, those who put a house on the market are getting approximately 98% of their original asking price. Mr. Martin added that covers everything from small houses to mansions, and that interest rates are creating a trickle-down effect. They both agreed that the current demand levels for houses will not go down **and** will not go away. Mr. Cooper stated that could lead to talks about how we can focus on affordable housing for the local workforce.

Ken Walter stated that what impressed him the most was the High Country Association of Realtors' relationship with developers. He asked if the High Country Association of Realtors would help put Avery County in touch with developers that might be interested in coming to Avery County to develop large areas for affordable housing. The housing Mr. Walter spoke of was for the workforce, not for retirees or recreation homes. This could lead young people and young families who have moved away to come back to the area. Mr. Martin indicated that the High Country Association of Realtors has developed a joint committee between themselves and builders. Builders come to the office of the High Country Association of Realtors once per month for a meeting. The goal is to determine commonalities and how to move forward and work together. Mr. Martin stated that he would like to do "town hall" types of meetings to expand their network and to put together data which could help everyone address problems.

Mr. Cooper stated that the research organization who does county assessments has done a study for Wilkes County, one for Burke County and is in the process of doing one for Carteret County. They are also in the process of doing an assessment through the Dogwood Foundation out of Asheville for 18 counties in western NC. Avery County is a part of that, but their focus is more on the health aspect. Being one of four counties would give more specialized information than being one of 18 counties.

The baseline cost of a study is \$22,000.00. The High Country Association of Realtors would put in half. Watauga County has agreed to pay \$3,000.00 to \$5,000.00; Ashe County has agreed to pay \$3,700.00, Allegheny County (Blue Ridge Development Center) has agreed to pay \$2,500.00. \$1,000.00 would be sufficient for Avery County to buy into the assessment. Phillip Barrier stated that Avery County will receive results of an assessment done by the Dogwood Foundation. That data will be received in July so we will receive some information from that. Mr. Barrier added that when he attended a meeting about it (Dogwood Foundation) he learned that Avery County is in the area covered by the High Country Association of Realtors, so we are getting a better price because much of the work has already been done. Ken Walter reiterated that this study will be for the whole county (housing study), and that the Main Street America grant would only be for Newland.

Mr. Cooper added that when the housing study is complete, a formal presentation will be done. Also, the High Country Association of Realtors can host a couple of workshops with developers, with other stakeholders where we have the information to help determine where we can go in the future. Mr. Cooper stated that in the way of feedback from other counties who have participated, he heard from Burke County that they were satisfied with the results, and that Wilkes County representatives had called the expenditure “some of the best money their EDC has spent.” He noted that an employer survey will be included. Two useful documents would result from the study. Phillip Barrier spoke of affording workforce housing and stated that the assessment would result in putting data on paper that he could use to show that Avery County needed affordable workforce housing. Mr. Martin used the phrase “smart growth” and talked about how the assessment data could be used to present to developers. Ken Walter referenced the kill & chill facility coming to Watauga County which could become a point of interest in talks with developers. Jerry Moody asked about community costs being included in the study. Mr. Cooper stated that we could ask and find out if such material would be included as part of the employer survey. Mr. Cooper again defined smart growth. EDC members offered examples of businesses engaged in rentals, small businesses, etc. which are new and expanding (VRBO, Air B&B at Linville Land Harbor, The Pineola Inn, Linville’s bed & breakfast, etc.) Valerie Jaynes stated that she has been in contact with Hilary Greenberg.

Mr. Cooper & Mr. Martin left the meeting at approximately 5:57 p.m.

Clayton Harpold asked if a vote was required for moving ahead with the above-noted project. Phillip Barrier responded by stating that it was the responsibility of the Avery County Commissioners to do so.

The business portion of the meeting began at 6:00 p.m.

(3) Unfinished Business

A. Photos & letter added to the website:

Ken Walter stated that we have added more photos to the updated website. Also, the YMCA had a flood, so we did not confer with Trey Oakley initially. We have since done so, and the YMCA's employer statement and photo have now been included on our website. Phillip Barrier added that the towns of Newland, Elk Park and Crossnore all need to focus on developing and improving their web sites. Big Boom Designs may do the layout and format for these pages, with Alex Gavenus assisting with the data and/or text.

B. Ken re. video project – Community Center, Hospital and High School status: Ken Walter has spoken with Jerry Moody and Phillip Barrier regarding doing a video of the new community center. Mr. Walter will get a cost estimate which will be presented to the Avery County Commissioners. The video may be produced during the time of the Avery County Fair (community center with fair in the background).

C. Ken re. Bent Pine Hollow, Chris Zecca encountering municipal roadblocks. Allen Cook, Mayland Small Business Center Director, Phillip Barrier and Ken Walter are hoping to bring all the stakeholders together at an upcoming on-site gathering. Mr. Walter reported that the project is hopefully moving ahead, but if this is not feasible or practical Mr. Zecca may decide to move his business to another area.

D. Phillip Barrier updates and other news re. O'Reilly Auto Parts, etc. Availability of Avery County Logo decals? Other new business news: Phillip Barrier reported that O'Reilly's Auto Parts new building is coming along. They hope to be open by August 1, 2021. He has not followed up on the Avery County logo decals. There is no news on the Newland strip mall. Valerie Jaynes stated that the owner plans to offer the building to the Town of Newland for purchase. Phillip Barrier stated that Family Dollar does a great business, and that other businesses which might locate there would do well. He stated that he does not expect that we will get another grocery store in that location.

(4) Agricultural sub-Committee Report [Jerry Moody]:

News and/or updated information on the kill & chill project news. Jerry Moody reported that the kill & chill project received a million dollar grant from the Gold Leaf Foundation. The building costs will be 1.46 million. They are seeking 46 million dollars from the County of Watauga. They seek \$220,000.00 from Tobacco Trust Fund and \$150,000.00 from the USDA Rural Business Grant. They have been approved to submit a \$100,000.00 grant to the Appalachian Regional Commission. Some of these will require a one-to-one match. House Bill 182, which is called the Increasing Meat Production Capacity bill. This is supposed to provide grants, which may help local workers in the Plumtree area. Mr. Moody said he expects this bill to pass. Hopefully, the kill & chill facility will be up and running in approximately two years. Ken Walter asked if the grants came through, if that would help the facility get USDA approved. Mr. Moody said that it could help with equipment, and that it could help move toward USDA approval.

Ken Walter suggested that the group delay talking about the homework assignment that we were given until the next meeting. At that time, we can look at setting goals and the mission statement. Terri Melton and Edward Dean have been provided copies of our original charter.

Mr. Walter stated that we have deviated from our charter. The deviation has made us more proactive and active as an EDC.

Phillip Barrier noted that the Shady Lawn Motel in Newland is closing down. This is due to the owner not being able to find a manager. He also noted that the Tartan in Linville has been closed periodically due to lack of staff. The lack of workers is an issue for many businesses, and this does include the County of Avery.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:33 p.m.

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday July 27, 2021.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila