

Avery County Economic Development Committee
July 27, 2021
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on July 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, Clayton Harpold, Dennis Aldridge (County Commissioner) Anne Winkleman, Terri Melton, Edward Dean, Angie Berry, guest Robin Morgan and Avery County Commissioner Chairperson Martha Hicks.

Member present via telephone conference call: Jerry Moody

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

(1) Welcome Edward Dean. Newly installed EDC member Edward Dean was welcomed to the group.

(2) Approve and/or amend the June 29, 2021 meeting minutes:
Kate Gavenus moved to accept the minutes as presented. Dave Smith seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

(3) Unfinished Business

A. Ken re: video project – Community Center, Hospital and High School status. Ken Walter received a price quote from Blue Ridge Film Productions, which he has submitted to Phillip Barrier, County Manager. He will present it to the Avery County Commissioners at the board meeting on Monday, August 2, 2021. The public hearing for the EDC budget will occur at the same meeting. If the budget is approved, presumably the price quote can be approved. Ken Walter reviewed the process for video production by Blue Ridge Film Productions. The company owner, Brent Ramsey, generally collects many minutes of film, and then edits it down to a usable video, which may be 60 seconds in length, or somewhere in that range. The video is then posted on the webpage. We plan to feature the Community Center in the first video, then the focus will be on the hospital (Cannon Memorial) followed by Avery County High School. Ken Walter has spoken with Cannon Memorial president Carmen Lacey, who relayed that it would be around October when she would be able to advise us on when a video may be shot at the hospital. Dave Smith advised that photos of the groundbreaking ceremony at Cannon Memorial Hospital are available for our use on the website. The proposed cost per video would be \$881.69. Ken Walter noted that photos may be added to give the video of the hospital extra emphasis. He will ask Brent Ramsey if we can use the price quote of \$881.69 for the next two videos, not just the one of the Community Center. The EDC budget will be approximately \$6,000.00 (a bit less according to Phillip Barrier). Phillip Barrier stated that the room/occupancy tax bill has not been approved. Per

Dennis Aldridge, our resolution was in place, but did not get moved into the General Assembly timely. He stated that a budget amendment could be done if need be.

Ken Walter indicated that one of the expenditures we may consider is our ad for the Chamber of Commerce Business Guide. He stated that we can look at increasing the size of the ad and perhaps changing the photo shown in our ad. Anne Winkleman reported that there were 10,000 hits on the chamber's website in one month. She added that the three sites that lead people to the Avery Chamber's website are (1) Blue Ridge Parkway, (2) Visit NC and (3) Sugar Mountain Resort. Ken Walter suggested that we have an ad which is large enough to promote the website.

B. Phillip Barrier's EDC review homework assignment. Ken Walter reminded the team that in the previous months' meeting, Phillip Barrier asked the group to do a review of the EDC as it relates back to Avery County given that we have been together for a little more than four years. Phillip Barrier stated that we have two primary goals and read from the webpage as follows: (1) To insure the success, growth and retention of our current businesses. (2) To attract new commerce to Avery County. He stated that what we need to focus on is deciding if our ideas fit these goals, or if we wish to change our goals. Ken Walter added that per the original charter, from 2017, we were charged to be basically an advisory committee to the board of commissioners. We have deviated from that in both positive and proactive ways as well as in counterproductive ways. Discussion occurred in which team members gave examples of issues in the county which may not be areas of concern for the EDC. For example, potholes in the roads and litter throughout the county were noted. Both are concerns, but it needs to be determined if it is appropriate for the EDC to address these matters. Kate Gavenus addressed the difference between *community development and economic development (emphasis added)*. She stated that we have been tasked with bringing in jobs & wealth to the community. When you do that, then people take care of the other issues. She stated that keeping the businesses that are here is much more valuable to focus on rather than recruitment of new businesses. She noted our small budget and reiterated that keeping the existing businesses and helping them expand is more important than attracting new businesses. Phillip Barrier stated that we need to look at getting available properties on our website. Both Phillip Barrier and Ken Walter have had potential small business entrepreneurs approach them about starting businesses in Avery County.

Ken Walter asked the team if more goals were needed. The group agreed that more goals were not necessary, but that determining strategies for achieving the goals may be helpful. Discussion occurred regarding planning and development of strategies. Kate Gavenus reminded the group of a presentation by Tommy Huskins at a previous meeting. Susan Siirila offered to compile data and create a list of ideas submitted by team members, to help determine the top items that team members wish to focus on. The team agreed to submit ideas to Ms. Siirila as a starting point for the development of a list of strategies, ideas and thoughts of what we want to accomplish. Clayton Harpold shared information regarding strategy development. Ken Walter agreed and noted that North Carolina has an incredible amount of resources for helping businesses get started versus New York, and directed team members to go online to review information about business start up assistance available in North Carolina. Mr. Harpold added that Allen Cooke, Mayland Community College, is a valuable resource for new businesses.

Ken Walter stated that the Town of Newland has approved a \$5,000.00 Community Development Grant available through the High Country Association of Realtors.

Avery County Commissioner Martha Hicks joined the meeting at 5:35 p.m. On behalf of the board of commissioners, Ms. Hicks thanked the EDC team for their work.

Dennis Aldridge revisited the homework assignment and data collection offered by Susan Siirila. He noted that as he does counseling, one of the things he encourages people to do is “write it down” as this helps to focus thought and makes the abstract become concrete. He believes this will help us to label targets that are reachable.

Phillip Barrier encouraged team members to make him aware of any retail buildings that may be available for lease in the area. Discussion occurred regarding possible locations that could be put up for lease, e.g. Jim Love’s service station.

Mr. Barrier spoke about perks that business owners may want to pursue such as money for facade updates, signage, permitting fees, etc. that would help them with saving money during the start-up phase of their business. Kate Gavenus stated that there are things that the county, as a government body, can do and have some control over.

Discussion occurred regarding possible locations for new businesses. Dennis Aldridge stated that we may need to help entrepreneurs who may want to locate their business in Avery County understand that they may not find a place on Hwy. 105 or in the middle of Newland, but that other locations may be available and viable.

Additional discussion occurred regarding goals and strategies to meet the goals.

Clayton Harpold stated that the first goal noted on our website should be a primary goal. Jerry Moody raised the question of infrastructure and possible issues related to water/sewer availability for business locations in the county. There is currently a project going on to expand Newland’s town water to Mountain Glen Golf Course.

Mr. Moody stated that there were no new updates on the Kill & Chill facility. He did remark that an individual that he knows will set up Geotech at the landfill where the facility will be located.

C. Workshop topic ideas? No report

D. Ken re: Bent Pine Hollow, Chris Zecca. Ken Walter reported that the current plan is on hold due to health concerns in Mr. Zecca’s family.

E. Dave Smith re: Retail Strategies. Dave Smith reported that there is no news on the former Lowes Foods property. Discussion occurred regarding the property being owned by the public sector versus private ownership.

F. Kate Gavenus re: Main Street America. No report

G. Other: Anne Winkleman reported the following data from the Chamber of Commerce: Watauga County has a population of 56,000. They have 687 chamber members, or 1.2%; Mitchell County has a population of 15,000. They have 255 chamber members, or 1.7%. Ashe County has a population of 26,000. They have 435 chamber members, or 1.6%. Avery County has a population of 17,000. They have 407 chamber members, or 2.32%. This data is based on 2019 numbers.

Ken Walter shared that he participated in a webinar (Zoom meeting) which was sponsored by Mayland Community College. The webinar addressed how businesses

can attract and retain employees. He reported that it was an excellent program and that we may wish to have a similar program for Avery County businesses. This would be like the workshop we planned for 2020 which was cancelled due to Covid.

Kate Gavenus shared that at Beech Mountain, affordable housing is a huge issue on getting people to come here and work. She has a meeting in a couple of weeks with developers. She will share their toolbox with them. The Town of Beech Mountain staff will sit down and talk about what they could do for developers who potentially want to develop affordable properties where people could live on the mountain. Most people who work there commute each day. She will report back to the team later. Ken Walter noted that if the county goes ahead with the county assessment, that will provide valuable information for developers also. It will also provide us networking contacts with developers that may, upon seeing the assessment, and the justification for affordable housing, move forward with a project. Phillip Barrier will get the information from the Dogwood Trust study and will forward information to EDC members later. The group briefly discussed a recent newspaper article outlining Governor Cooper's economic diversity funding for broadband expansion in North Carolina.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:10 p.m.

The next meeting is scheduled for August 31, 2021.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila