

Avery County Economic Development Committee
August 31, 2021
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on August 31, 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, Robin Morgan representing the Avery County Chamber of Commerce and guest Neil Falvey of the Avery Journal Newspaper.

Member absent: Jerry Moody

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

(1) Approve and/or amend the July 27, 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) Unfinished Business

A. Ken re: video project – Community Center. Ken Walter and Jerry Moody met with Brent Ramsey of Blue Ridge Film Productions last week. The video will be shot at approximately noon on September 20, 2021. The cost quoted for the video of the Community Center will be the cost for the Cannon Memorial Hospital and the Avery County High School video projects.

B. Susan Siirila to provide the “Goals” input she received/EDC homework assignment:
See Below.

C. Ken to explain an offer he has from Allen Cooke (Mayland Community College) for us to host the “Finding, Keeping and Motivating Workers Workshop” as previously presented by Professor Tonya Snider in Burnsville. Mr. Walter reminded the group that at the last meeting, he talked about a workshop which he attended which addressed how employers may attract and retain employees. He felt it was one of the best workshops that he had ever attended. We have the opportunity, through Allen Cooke & Mayland Community College, to bring the presenter to Avery County. Mayland Community will cover the cost of the presenter; we will need to provide a venue and a lunch. Mr. Walter shared that we were a week and a half away from hosting a similar workshop when Covid issues required cancellation (March 2020). Mr. Walter has already talked with Jerry Moody about using the Community Center as our venue. He will discuss other particulars with Phillip Barrier and the county commissioners. The workshop will be available for direct participation and also via ZOOM for those unable to attend in person.

D. Web Site Success – Sarah Killby, Banner Elk, starting a marketing company and read about our referral services. She was delighted to learn about Allen Cooke, Mayland Community College.

E. Ken: Latest Newland Structall and Bent Pine Hollow news: Mr. Walter reported that he received an email from Victoria Bowman (Structall) last week. They are moving ahead and will work with Mayland Community College as well as perhaps working with Susan Siirila and John Greene, former employees of the Avery County Career Center on the task of securing employees. Victoria and her spouse will be moving to Avery County permanently. Structall will be located on Hwy. 181 at the old TRW/IRC building.

(3) Phillip Barrier updates and other news:

Phillip Barrier reported that the website has produced good results. He reported that he has had two people look at the website & that he has gotten telephone calls and emails about possible businesses looking at Avery County. He reported that he has had continuing conversations regarding the old Lowes Foods property in Newland. Mr. Barrier reported that O'Reilly's Auto Parts is finishing their building and that they plan to open in February 2022. The County Fair is September 8 through September 11, 2021. The fair is open nightly 5:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m., and admission is free. Covid vaccines will be available at the fair. Masks will be recommended for visitors inside the Community Center but will not be required outdoors.

Mr. Barrier reported that the road has been closed near Food Lion (Hwy. 184) but that it has been a great opportunity for people to travel through other parts of the county.

Phillip Barrier stated that decals had been discussed, but there has been no forward movement so far on pursuing the project.

Dennis Aldridge noted that Avery County has been anticipating receipt of American Recovery Relief funding. He stated that Avery County has been very conservative on proceeding until clear guidance and guidelines have been received. He stated that Avery County officials do not know the exact amount the county may receive yet, but that we have received the first payment, and holding that money to avoid issues going forward.

Dave Smith stated that he has had conversations with Elon Musk representatives about Wi-Fi, internet, etc. He stated that his agency has a project going on in the southern part of Avery County, and according to Elon Musk representatives, by December, we will have 150 mgs. available at that area. Discussion occurred regarding this and other satellite internet availability. Mr. Smith shared that the representatives he had spoken with advised that the equipment cost is \$500.00 & monthly service thereafter is \$99.00.

(4) New Business and/or other issues to address:

A. Ken Walter noted that he will not be available September 9, 2021, through September 17, 2021.

B. Ken Walter shared with the group that he had received an email from Melynda Pepple, Grandfather Golf and Country Club, that she had looked at the EDC website and that she thought it looked great.

C. American Recovery Plan news applicable to Avery County & EDC.
No report.

(5) Avery County Chamber of Commerce – Anne Winkleman
No report.

(6) Agricultural sub-Committee Report – Jerry Moody
No report.

(7) Marketing sub-Committee Report:

A. Ken Walter stated that he has asked Anne Winkleman to have someone that she knows to re-design the EDC ad in the Tourist and Business Guide. If we can get the re-design cost approved, Ms. Winkleman has been asked to quote both the cost for a half page and a full-page ad.

Ken Walter reminded the group that the Avery County EDC was formed in 2017. We are at a point where we feel that we have accomplished a lot, but at the same time we are at a point where we need to take a look at where we are going and how we are going to get there. Susan Siirila offered to collect up to five goals and objectives from team members. She shared the results of the data collection as possible.

Susan Siirila reviewed the responses which she received from EDC team members and shared a spreadsheet (see attachment) on which the responses were compiled. She stated that she used the spreadsheet as a means by which to tally responses. She stated that the items which emerged as the top goals are:

1. Toolbox: New business guide or “toolbox” like the one developed for and described by Kate Gavenus for the Town of Beech Mountain. Part of this is already on the website. Ms. Siirila stated that the responses she received indicated a desire for the creation of a ‘hard copy’ packet of information for employers and entrepreneurs (or a click and print tool).

2. Business fair, workshops for employers/training & usage of the new Community Center for training. The group agreed that if we proceed with pursuing this goal, the focus need to be not only on entrepreneurs, but also on existing businesses.

3. Enhance website, add links/demographic data, statistics and work on continued updates on our existing website.

4. Develop a written plan (goals, objectives, strategies) to guide EDC efforts. Development of an EDC mission statement. Determine types of businesses we want to attract to Avery County.

Kate Gavenus noted that in order to accomplish the first goal (toolbox) that it is first necessary to have a mission statement. She stated that in order to create matrices, as she did for the toolbox she crafted for the Town of Beech Mountain, we need to know what types of business we hope to attract. Otherwise, we are only going to collect pages on non-quantifiable information. To put a numerical value on items, we need to go through the process of looking at types of businesses we want to attract. To do so, we must set forth the values that are shared and important to the community. Clayton Harpold stated that a strong mission statement is necessary in order to know who we are, what we want to present and express to the public. Once a mission statement is in place, then goals, objectives and strategies can be addressed. He stated that a mission statement will show who we are and what we are all about. Ms. Siirila pointed out that there is not a reason that we must address the goals in the order they were presented, and that goal two can be addressed before goal one, or perhaps that both could be looked at simultaneously. She added that she felt that many of the responses set forth on the spreadsheet could perhaps be integrated into the mission statement, and that they were all important. Ms. Siirila concluded by sharing information from a statement sent to her by Anne Winkleman showing that since the 1960's, a focus of economic development committees has been poverty reduction.

Following additional discussion regarding the goals and objectives submitted by team members,

Kate Gavenus stated that she believes that if we focus on the development of a mission statement, and thereafter define some goals, and determine what types of businesses would be most suitable for recruiting or seeking to expand.

Phillip Barrier added that it was important to note that the Avery County commissioners and county manager are working on the issue of affordable housing. He and Mr. Walter both indicated that the housing study will bring credibility to our needs to attract developers. Dennis Aldridge used the phrase "if we build it, they will come" in discussing the issue of affordable housing. Discussion occurred regarding how Air B&B and VRBO are affecting the availability of rentable housing. Dave Smith stated that he is aware of potential property buyers with capital gains money which they wish to invest. Mr. Smith stated that a problem in this area is that there are no developers who wish to do production building. This is a thing which is truly needed in this area. Ken Walter stated that if houses were available in the \$150,000.00 to \$250,000.00 range it would be a very sellable investment. He noted that he has heard from many people that Avery County is seen as a very safe place to raise a family. Dave Smith agreed and again noted that with interest rates where they are, such houses would sell. Mr. Smith shared some of his experiences with developers in California and envisioning the same types of home building/selling in this area. Robin Morgan and Dennis Aldridge set forth information regarding census/demographic numbers required by some developers who are researching the area. Team members agreed that the population of Avery County varies by season and both summer and winter population numbers are far beyond what is reported.

Susan Siirila stated that she believed that development of a mission statement and development of a toolbox would take the team through January 2022 to complete. Dave Smith asked Kate Gavenus if she would be willing to work with two or three other team members when the time comes to develop the toolbox. She said that she would and that what she prepared for the Town of Beech Mountain took her approximately six months.

Phillip Barrier stated that the High-Country Council of Governments wrote a grant for the Dogwood Trust to do an inventory assessment for Avery County. This will involve assessing water and sewer throughout the county. This will be in addition to the housing study.

Clayton Harpold stated that in terms of a mission statement, that we need to stay within the primary goals given to us by the county commissioners: to ensure the success, growth and retention of our current businesses & to attract new businesses to Avery County. He suggested we think about how to put those two goals into a statement, not numerical points, but a statement that is going to define what the EDC is all about. He stated that team members could send their thoughts to him. Mr. Harpold said that what we need to do is take the points and put them into a statement of "this is who we are." He added that a two to three sentence paragraph should be sufficient. Ken Walter asked Clayton Harpold and Kate Gavenus if they would choose team members (not necessarily an EDC member) if they would take on the task of development of a mission statement. They agreed to do so.

Ken Walter concluded by stating that so much of the focus must be on the businesses that already exist in our county. He referenced the aforementioned workshop and stated that we must continue to look at ways for employers to attract and retain employees. Discussion regarding lack of employees, the termination date of federal extended Unemployment Insurance benefits and the impact it has on employers occurred.

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

The next meeting is scheduled for September 28, 2021.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila