

Avery County Economic Development Committee
August 30, 2022

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 p.m. August 30, 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, Jerry Moody, Ellis Ayers, Kate Gavenus, Edward Dean, Clayton Harpold, Dave Smith, Terri Melton. Anne Winkleman and Phillip Barrier, County Manager. Guests were Dr. John Boyd, Mayland Community College. Lily Kincaid, Avery Journal Newspaper and Keeli Faucett, CTE & Marketing Instructor with Avery County Schools.

Member absent: Dennis Aldridge, Avery County Commissioner

Ken Walter called the meeting to order at 5:03 p.m.

1. Approve and/or amend the July 26, 2022 minutes

Kate Gavenus made a motion to accept the minutes as presented. Clayton Harpold seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

2. Unfinished Business

A. Kate Gavenus: Report on New Business Guide Toolbox project and survey budget status

Ms. Gavenus reported that she and County Manager Phillip Barrier will meet on Friday September 2, 2022 to discuss the budget. Ken Walter will take the data they provide following their meeting to the second county commissioner's meeting in September for approval.

B. Kate Gavenus: Report on Building Outdoor Communities

Ms. Gavenus shared information she got at a workshop she recently attended called Building Outdoor Communities. It is a project that is available from Mountain BizWorks, Dogwood Trust and by the Appalachian Regional Commission. An idea promoted by the group is that we are all "made by the mountains." The program addresses sustainable tourism and a sustaining a rural economy that is good for the community and the visitor as well. The group has requested that each county have a core team working together. Phillip Barrier and Kate Gavenus are part of the core team for Avery County. There will be others added to the team. Katy Wall of Lees-McRae College is the person who submitted the application for Avery County. Teams will be separated into cohorts. The three cohorts are (1) acceleration group (2) planning group and (3) initiation phase. The groups will begin a seven month intensive program in September 2023. Discussion occurred regarding other individuals in the county who may participate on groups. Ms. Gavenus shared the website: www.madexmtns.com for more information.

C. Phillip Barrier to report on his efforts to recruit a presenter for workshop:

No report.

D. Phillip Barrier to report on the Great Grant, CAV Grant and American Recovery Plan funds going forward to provide broadband coverage: The Great Grant has been approved; Spectrum has been successful with the grant. The paperwork has not been signed yet. Mr. Barrier continues to work with the High Country Council of Governments on the paperwork. This may be presented at the second meeting of the county commissioners in September. The CAB grant cannot be pursued until completion of the CAV grant. The county commissioners have pledged to take the ARP funds and add \$3,000,000.00 into the CAB. The state will match with \$3,000,000.00 and the provider adds \$1,000,000.00 for a total of \$7,000,000.00. Part A, the CAV must be completed before part B, the CAB can be pursued thereafter. Mr. Barrier concluded by noting that issues with infrastructure, labor, available fiber materials and deadlines concern him about completion of the project. This will be buried fiber to the home.

E. Phillip Barrier to report on apartment complex at old Lowes Strip Mall property: Mr. Barrier reported that the planned apartment complex at the old Lowes Foods property is still moving forward. The Dogwood Trust is assisting. They have indicated that the project may begin next spring. The concern is staffing at Family Dollar (retailer on the property). They have planned to expand, but do not have a sufficient number of employees.

F. Electric Car Charging Stations: Mr. Barrier stated that a grant has been applied for, but we have not heard anything from it yet. The grant was submitted before the deadline, so hopefully we will get an electric car charging station for the county.

Mr. Barrier provided a handout from Bill Slagle, Economic Development representative from the state, showing January 2021 to December 30, 2021, demographic, retail, tourism data for counties in western NC.

3. Pending Unfinished Business

A. Avery County High School & Cannon Hospital videos: Ken Walter reported that Brent Ramsey, Blue Ridge Film Productions is very busy at this time. The plan is to delay until fall leaf season to work on drone video footage for use in the videos and then do the interview videos in November or early December. Mr. Walter will advise security at both locations as to why a drone is filming and get clearance accordingly.

B. Occupancy Tax: The bill is currently in the Senate. No other report on the matter. Mr. Barrier stated that there has not been an occupancy tax bill passed since 2017.

Discussion occurred regarding working commuters coming into and going out of Avery County for work, and what counties they are traveling to/from. Dr. Boyd advised that he would locate said data and pass it along. Ellis Ayers addressed keeping younger individuals in the county versus relocating for employment after high school. He stated that the Outdoor Living piece is something to look at in terms of ways to facilitate keeping younger workers in the area. Phillip Barrier stated that he and Dr. Boyd met with Dogwood Trust representatives regarding some housing possibilities at the Avery/Mitchell County line near Mayland Community College's

campus. This would offer housing for students or workers, and the project is moving forward. Mr. Barrier has also spoken with Dogwood Trust representatives and representatives of Lees-McRae College regarding affordable housing on the Grandfather Home for Children property. He reported that someone is looking at the property across the street from the Avery Board of Education office (Linville Electric Co. building). The Town of Newland did receive a grant to extend water/sewer services to Mountain Glen Golf Course/Mountain Top Community. The housing study/inventory study by Dogwood Trust is in the works and should be complete within the next 60 days. This will identify all the property that may be utilized for workforce housing.

Ken Walter gave a brief update on discussions with Mike Lacey regarding his property in Newland that may be available for sale, and the possibility of utilization of the land for market based housing. He has worked on this with Dan Williams.

Mr. Walter also gave brief overview of the recent cooperative extension farm tour.

4. New Business and/or other issues to address

A. Next Workshop – The next workshop is scheduled for October 11, 2022. It will be held at the community center. We have reserved the community center from 10:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Ellis Ayers will provide a biography of the presenter, Charlie Milling. Susan Siirila will prepare another brochure, like the one used at the June workshop. We will have handouts available for attendees on available apprenticeship programs. The Avery Journal Newspaper will help advertise the upcoming workshop, as will the Avery County Chamber of Commerce. Funding for lunch for workshop attendees will be available. We will proceed with planning for space and lunch for 45 participants.

A discussion on new businesses occurred. The businesses discussed were as follows: Mountain Grounds Coffee Shop. New owners have the business and offer coffee, breakfast, and lunch. They are investigating starting a food truck. There is a new knife and axe throwing business located at Tynecastle beside Highlanders restaurant. A ropes course is now available at the Alpine Slide recreation area.

5. Agricultural sub-Committee Report – Jerry Moody

Mr. Moody stated that he had no new information on the kill and chill facility. On September 15, 2022, Mr. Moody has scheduled a meeting to address Conservation/Agricultural easements. Local Christmas tree growers will be invited and there will be at least 2 expert presenters to explain available programs. All this to address how farmers & landowners can protect their property from future development. He has one landowner who has 70 acres and is willing to get into a farming conservation program. If that goes well, there are funds available to help some of the costs.

Mr. Moody reminded the group that the Avery County Fair will be held September 7th through the 10th. He expects many livestock showings/exhibits coming to the fair.

Mr. Moody reported on a serious matter involving the spread or infestation of the Spotted Lantern Fly. Mr. Moody explained that the insect is an invasive pest that generally is brought into an area on vehicles such as cars, RV's and trucks. He stated that the insect has been

located as close as Kernersville, NC. He reported that if the insect gets into Christmas trees that would be exported from Avery County, then other areas not infected might quarantine the trees, and this would impact the retail sales of trees during this upcoming Christmas season. We export 2 – 3 million trees for Florida alone.

Mr. Moody stated that the average price of a 6-7 foot tree is \$46.00 wholesale. Tree growers can expect to average income of \$83,000.00 per acre of sellable trees. Discussion occurred regarding Avery County tree grower Larry Smith, who is working in partnership with 84 Lumber, for delivery of a Christmas tree to the U.S. Capital in Washington DC from the Pisgah National Forest.

6. Education sub-Committee Report – Ellis Ayers

Mr. Ayers reported that school has started in Avery County. There are currently 1,840 students. There are no contractors at Avery County High School as all construction work has now been completed. The football field at Avery High School has been covered with new turf. New lighting has been installed and the track surface has been done. He invited the team to come to football games and described a new program which will highlight students who have chosen a career path and are currently working in hands-on learning to reach their goals.

Anne Winkleman reminded the group that the Wooly Worm Festival is coming soon, October 16 & 17. Volunteers are needed to help with the festival. She stated that there will be many craft vendors there as well as food vendors. More emphasis will be put on activities in the kids' section, adding inflatables, etc.

Discussion occurred regarding staffing issues at many Avery County businesses. Some businesses have resorted to closures and alternating schedules to address the problem.

Dr. Boyd updated the group on Mayland Community College's cosmetology program opening soon at the old coliseum and reported that the planetarium is doing well.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:19 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila