

Avery County Economic Development Committee
September 27, 2022

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 p.m. September 27, 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, Dennis Aldridge, County Commissioner and Phillip Barrier, County Manager. Guests were Lily Kincaid, Avery Journal Newspaper, Maxine McLaughlin and Nathan Zumwalt of Pisgah Legal Services.

Members absent: Dave Smith, Terri Melton and Anne Winkleman

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

1. Approve and/or amend the August 30, 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.

[An agenda change follows, moving section D under unfinished business to the beginning of the meeting as county manager Phillip Barrier had to leave the meeting]

2. Unfinished Business

D. Phillip Barrier to report on the progress of the Great Grant, CAV Grant and American Recovery Plan funds going forward to provide county broadband coverage. Mr. Barrier reported that we are still on track as far as broadband and that we will have updates soon on the Great Grant. He reported that the upcoming EDC workshop has been publicized and that the response has been good following the Avery Chamber of Commerce's email publicity of the event.

3. Guest speaker presentation – Maxine McLaughlin, Tax Credit & Health Justice Advocate from Pisgah Legal Services

Ken Walter introduced Ms. McLaughlin and yielded the floor to her. Ms. McLaughlin shared her job title and basic information on the Legal Services program. Legal Services is a non-profit agency that has been based in Buncombe County for the last 43 years. They offer free services to low income individuals. All work is civil in nature; they do not assist with criminal matters. The agency has expanded their geographic territory for services and have added available services as well. The agency can assist individuals with signing up for the Affordable Care Act. Also, they assist with income tax filing. At this time, they offer free income tax filing assistance for households earning less than \$58,000.00 per year. This service is offered to all 18 western NC counties. They will offer a tax clinic at Crossnore School for Children and may have similar clinics in other areas also. They can assist people who may have qualified for,

but who did not receive, the 2020 and 2021 rebates (stimulus money). They may also assist families who qualified for the child tax credit in 2021. Families who generally do not file a tax return may get assistance in doing so at Legal Services, thereby qualifying for child tax credits up to \$3,600.00 per child.

Ms. McLaughlin stated that her program focuses on the HEOP, or Health and Economic Opportunity Program. The goal of the program is to reduce childhood poverty through tax credits, tax returns and by offering affordable health insurance through the Affordable Care Act. She noted that many individuals earning over 400% of the federal poverty limit may still qualify for assistance on their health coverage under the Affordable Care Act. Legal Services can help them find what they are eligible for.

She reviewed material from a handout she shared with the group. The highlights are as follows: In 2021, only 76 Avery County residents received assistance from Legal Services. This is .5 % of the population. Based on demographics, Ms. McLaughlin stated that they could possibly serve at least half of the households if not 70% to 80% of households in Avery County.

Ms. McLaughlin stated that Legal Services representatives can visit existing businesses if they reach out and request services. She concluded by stating that her primary goal is to get the word out about Legal Services and what they offer in the way of services.

Ms. McLaughlin concluded her presentation at 5:24 p.m.

Mr. Walter gave a "shout out" to EDC member Edward Dean who was recently name "Best of the Best" Avery Journal Award for best pharmacy and best pharmacist.

4. Unfinished Business

A. Apprenticeships Workshop on October 11, 2022

Ken Walter reported that the Avery Chamber of Commerce had done an email blast providing information on the workshop and will do again next week. The scheduled speaker is Charlie Milling, Regional Youth Apprenticeship Coordinator. EDC member Ellis Ayres will also speak, bringing the discussion from the state level down to the local level. The Avery Journal has also advertised the workshop in a choice location of the newspaper. Dawn Carpenter, Administrative Assistant to the County Manager, has sent out invitations, using the list from our June 2022 workshop. Discussion occurred regarding the importance of apprenticeships in our area and why we should work to get as many businesses as possible lined up to participate in the workshop. Dennis Aldridge shared statistical data that he has learned through the High Country Council of Governments. Specifically, FAFSA (financial aid) paperwork completion has increased and the number of students who pursue additional education after completion of a FAFSA application has increased. Susan Siirila has arranged for lunch to be catered by Little Deer Café in Linville. She is also working on a handout for the workshop and Dawn Carpenter has a second handout printed and ready for distribution. Mr. Walter has requested that the workshop be taped and will discuss with Arizona Cragg at the Community Center having the video available for review on YouTube, hopefully for longer than a one week period.

Dennis Aldridge added, in the discussion on apprenticeships, that apprentices must be considered employees, and that they cannot be 1099 contractors or other short term employees and thereby qualify the employer for participation in reimbursement programs. Susan Siirila added that workers on a work visa, or those working on an H2A or H2B program must be specifically reviewed for candidacy as an apprentice, and that inclusion of such workers in apprenticeship programs has been misunderstood in the past.

B. Kate Gavenus report on New Business Guide Tool Box Project & Budget Status

Ken Walter reported that the cost for the use of Survey Monkey for a one year period would be \$384.00. He will attend the county commissioners' meeting on Monday (10/03/22) to seek approval for the expenditure. Kate Gavenus spoke to the value of Survey Monkey. She said that a survey was not a requirement, as usable data was available from other sources. However, the use of a survey would be helpful for community "buy in" and shared community vision. A survey could present questions to help determine what types of businesses would be valued, what is here that is useful and valuable, what is not here that would be helpful, etc. Ms. Gavenus noted that Survey Monkey is usable and familiar to people. The point of the survey would be to ask leadership and residents in the county what they feel they would like to see. Ken Walter added that two aspects of the survey that would be critically important: (1) to ask individuals why they landed in Avery County and (2) address the need to keep agricultural land solely for agricultural use and not for development. If we allow unrestricted development, we will lose our culture and we lose what has made Avery County so special in the first place. Dennis Aldridge added that material that is being put together via other sources, such as Bowen, could be used in conjunction with data collected through a survey to have usable material to present to developers who may have an interest in locating workforce housing in the area.

Edward Dean made a motion to request \$384.00 from the budget be appropriated for the purchase of Survey Monkey for a one year period. Clayton Harpold seconded. No additional discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

5. Pending Unfinished Business

A. Avery County High School and Cannon Hospital Videos: Ken Walter has not received updates from Brent Ramsey but expects to hear from Brent when we reach peak fall color. Mr. Ramsey plans to use his drone to film footage at both locations.

B. Occupancy Tax: Dennis Aldridge reported that the Occupancy Tax bill will be presented to the NC General Assembly again in the spring of 2023. The bill made it to the floor during the last session of the NC General Assembly.

C. Other: Ellis Ayers noted that he is excited about the upcoming workshop. He expects that it will be a good way for individuals to understand how to plug into the workforce. What we have been doing is not as effective as in times past. He stated that helping students learn 'what comes next' is very important. Students can learn of a viable pathway into the workforce which they may not be aware of. Discussion occurred regarding earning credentials vs. earning a diploma and seeking trade training vs. a college degree.

6. New Business and/or other issues to address

A. Dan Williams & Ken Walter to report on their recent efforts re: the development of affordable/market rate apartment housing in Newland. Ken Walter reported that he and Dan Williams have worked with Jennifer Beam, Town of Newland, and Phillip Barrier, County of Avery and that they have made three attempts to put together a meeting to address development of the 13-16 acres owned by Mike Lacey (near the Avery County Board of Education building). As of yesterday, they have aborted that plan, but will try again in October. Mr. Walter reported that Dan Williams knows of a developer that seems to be very interested in the property, and that would most likely lean toward apartments for workforce/affordable housing.

7. Avery County Chamber of Commerce – Anne Winkleman

In Ms. Winkleman's absence, Kate Gavenus reported that all chamber projects are going along very well. We are moving toward the Woolly Worm Festival. Also, this year there will be designated parking areas for volunteers. This year's Woolly Worm Festival should be better organized and accessible with a better flow of traffic.

8. Agricultural sub-Committee Report – Jerry Moody

Jerry Moody stated that there were no updates on the kill and chill project in Watauga County. They did receive a grant from the NCDA, which should be sufficient to get the building up. Mr. Moody participated in a farmland conservation meeting on September 15, 2022. He had Evan Davis from NCDA and Andrew Brannon from NC State University. Farmers are getting pestered from developers who contact them every day. The goal at the meeting was to discuss other options. They do have one grower who is willing to be a 'guinea pig' so that other farmers can see what must be done regarding conservancy. Blue Ridge Conservancy representatives were at the meeting. This agency, along with NCDA, will help facilitate the two year process. Fifteen new applications for the farmland conservation program were sent out.

Mr. Moody reported that there is a bill in the legislature called "Right to Repair Farm Equipment." This comes down to "better to lease than to buy" when it comes to farm equipment. If one purchases farm equipment, and it breaks down, the owner does not have authority to repair it as they do not have proprietary knowledge in the equipment. The current bill, if passed, would mean that proprietary knowledge could be accessible by the owner to repair the equipment.

Mr. Moody reported that the Avery County Fair was a success. There were 2,500 visitors at the fair on Friday, which was the most attendees on any day. The county contributed \$7,500.00 to the fair. The expenditures were between \$11,000.00 and \$12,000.00 and they made approximately \$16,000.00. Mr. Moody reported that parking during the fair had been an issue, as attendees parked at Ingles/Roses and at Rick Pittman Trucking parking lots.

Mr. Moody concluded by reporting that the Haunted Trail is coming up on October 14 and October 15, followed by a screening of the movie Hocus Pocus. Cost for adults will be \$10.00 each.

9. Mayland Community College – John Boyd

No Report

10. Education sub-Committee Report – Ellis Ayers

Ellis Ayers reported that the Business Advisory Council will meet at the high school on October 4, 2022. One topic of discussion will be internships. The goal is to increase the number of opportunities to get students out into the workforce to see what work is about. He said that one area where improvements can be made is through intentional advisement, specifically helping students address the question of what needs to be done to get them to college if that is the route they choose. He stated that not just in Avery County, but high schools in general, have pushed students to go to college, sometimes resulting in ‘college without purpose’ situations, which should be changed. Mr. Ayers stated that educational facilities should instead push students to instead focus on what they intend to do after high school ‘with purpose.’ Internships can help with this, as young people only know what they can associate themselves with. Mr. Ayers reported that many Avery High School students are attending Mayland Community College classes on campus at Avery High, but their classes do not meet every day of the week. These students would be good internship candidates as they could participate in internship activities on the days their classes are not meeting.

Mr. Ayers reported that Avery High School has hired a Career Development Coordinator, Carrie Greene. Ms. Greene will be coordinating internships as well as setting up job shadowing and workplace opportunities. They are currently writing a two year grant for \$60,000.00. This would be used to set up a career advisory center at the high school. There is already a student services department at which they have high school counselors. Mr. Ayers noted that the missing link is counseling for students to help them determine “if you’re going to college, what do you intend to do while you are there?” The goal is to put efforts on the advising, knowledge and connections.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday October 25, 2022

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila