

Avery County Economic Development Committee
October 27, 2020
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on October 27, 2020 at Avery County Complex, located at 175 Linville Street, Newland, NC 28657.

Present for the meeting were:

Phillip Barrier (County Manager), Ken Walter, Dave Smith, Clayton Harpold, Kate Gavenus, Dennis Aldridge (Avery County Commissioner), Melynda Pepple, Susan Siirila, and Jerry Moody.

Member Absent: Eric Berg.

No members attended via internet.

Chairperson Ken Walter convened the meeting at 5:03 p.m.

(1) Approve and/or Amend the September 29, 2020 Meeting Minutes

Melynda Pepple moved to approve the minutes as presented. Clayton Harpold seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

(2) Unfinished Business

- A. Website Development Project Status Update: Ken Walter stated that the Website Development Project had stalled, and that he was not sure why. He stated that he was disappointed, as there were no questions regarding objectives and goals set forth by the developer (Sassmann). Mr. Walter has had discussions with Boomer Sassmann (Big Boom Designs), but we have yet to see anything. At Mr. Walter's suggestion, a conference call will be conducted with Mr. Sassmann, Mr. Walter, Mr. Moody and Mr. Barrier. Melynda Pepple indicated that page one is already on the Chamber of Commerce site. Ken Walter stated that Boomer Sassmann has not transferred any other EDC information to the Chamber of Commerce site, and that we understood that the material needed to go from Dennis Holland (Avery County I.T. representative) to Sassman, and that it would then be transferred to the EDC site. That would be all of part one of the project. Discussion occurred regarding the EDC team's goals for the website, and what we would hope to see in the way of results, or "hits" on the page. Jerry Moody asked what our alternatives were if developer Boomer Sassmann could not deliver what we wanted. Melynda Pepple responded, and noted that she is confident that he can deliver, but that he is just behind. She will work toward reaching out to Sassmann again.
- B. Clayton Harpold: EDC Budget Report
Mr. Harpold yielded the floor to Phillip Barrier. Mr. Barrier stated that a public hearing on the budget had been held, and that the budget had been approved as presented. He added that the Board of Commissioners appreciate the work being done by the EDC.
- C. Kate Gavenus: Main Street America in Newland
No report.

D. Retaining Employees Workshop

No report.

- E. Reminder: Allen Cook, Director of Mayland Community College Small Business Center continues to offer various assistance programs & services to help business owners understand and apply for grants and loans.

(3) Phillip Barrier Updates

Phillip Barrier reviewed current unemployment rate numbers for Avery and surrounding counties. Avery County is in good shape, jobs are plentiful and retail sales numbers are up, even without the Woolly Worm Festival this year.

He stated that Bojangles is approved and will be coming to Newland. He stated that the construction of the building will go faster than we expect, and that he has sent a letter to the Bojangles corporate offices to thank them for locating in Newland.

Regarding the Broadband pursuit, that ARC grant is still out. We are still waiting on the Great Grant as well. CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) money is still available for the county. Matching funds are available for recipients of CDBG funding.

Mr. Barrier reported that Structall is still in the works. There is a construction trailer at the site (old IRC building). They are taking bids on upgrades. He stated that Structall has recently opened a facility in Texas, and that we expect they will locate here, but that it will take time.

Mr. Barrier reported on the NC Snow Sports Industry. Five counties in our area have snow sports, and it is a \$228 million dollar business. This year, snow sports providers will be provided with guidelines on Covid-19 restrictions and how to proceed.

Mr. Barrier reported on the Government Affairs - Realtors Association. Wilkes and Burke Counties have had housing studies completed to look at rentals, housing for seniors, etc. He proposed that a study in Avery County may be helpful.

Mr. Barrier stated that the cases of Covid-19 were at 25% in Avery County currently. The Department of Health and Human Services looks at county-by-county numbers and those counties at 25% or above are considered "red flag" counties. The current statewide average is 5.9%. Mr. Barrier stated that we need to continue to "do what we have been doing" and that hopefully we will begin to see our numbers decrease. He concluded by stating that all county agencies have done a good job of dealing with Covid-19, and that we do have PPE resources.

(4) Dave, Phillip, Ken: Newland strip mall property development status

Dave Smith reported that he is currently working on three projects in Avery County. He stated that we have people ready to invest in us, and that one wants to locate in Newland. Dennis Aldridge shared information from the HCCOG meeting which he attended recently. The information included data on unemployment and retail sales tax numbers through July 2020. He noted that retail sales tax revenue is 18.2% higher in the High Country area than for the same period in 2019.

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

A. New EDC member candidate list: Review of candidates for Jesse Pope's position
Melynda Pepple has contacted Angie Aldridge of Blue Ridge Propane. She will submit an application.

Kate Gavenus has contacted David Tate of Yellow Mountain Enterprises. He is considering submission of an application.

Ken Walter has contacted Rick Owen, manager of the Town of Banner Elk. Mr. Owen will submit an application.

Susan Siirila has contacted Tim and Karen Bounds of Mountain Jewelers. They have opted not to apply, but did offer to assist the EDC as mentors for small business owners considering the Avery County area for the location of their business.

B. Resources Directory - will be addressed later.

C. Eric Berg - presentation follow up re: quality of life and tourist investments. Mr. Berg was not in attendance. The presentation will occur at a later date.

(6) Agricultural sub-Committee Report (Jerry Moody)

Jerry Moody reported that harvest season for Christmas trees has begun. He stated that five cases of Covid-19 have been traced back to migrant seasonal farm workers. He stated that the second round of Covid-19 funding has been sent out to tree growers; the growers are getting funding at this time that they would not normally receive.

Mr. Moody stated that Jim Hamilton, Watauga County Agricultural Extension representative has indicated that there is still potential in the Kill/Chill project. There is not the level of focus as before, but it still exists. Mr. Moody indicated that non-farm homeowners are concerned about a tree farm or livestock processing plant being located near their home. He noted that educating non-farm families is important. He concluded by noting that waterless soap is being distributed to migrant seasonal farm workers, along with masks.

Discussion occurred regarding the possible shortage of Christmas trees due to the downturn in planting during the poor economy of 2008-2014. Some small growers stopped planting trees, and the larger growers did not plant as many trees as they have in the past. It was predicted that "Choose & Cut" tree growers will have a good year.

Dennis Aldridge noted that the Heritage Center is coming along very well and that they have already had people wishing to reserve it.

Melynda Pepple stated that there are new businesses joining the Chamber of Commerce all the time.

Discussion occurred regarding scheduling the next meeting. The next normal meeting would be scheduled during Thanksgiving week. The group agreed to move the next meeting to December 1, 2020.

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

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila

