

Avery County Economic Development Committee
November 29, 2022

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 p.m. November 29, 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, Edward Dean, Dave Smith, Terri Melton, Clayton Harpold, Dennis Aldridge, Avery County Commissioner and Phillip Barrier, Avery County Manager. Guests were Robin Morgan & Anne Winkleman, Avery County Chamber of Commerce and Lily Kincaid, Avery Journal Newspaper

Member Absent: Kate Gavenus

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

1. Approve and/or amend the October 25, 2022 minutes

Jerry Moody made a motion to accept the minutes as presented. Dave Smith seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

Susan Siirila shared information and collected funds for a donation from the EDC team to Volunteer Avery County. The team agreed to earmark the donation collected at the November meeting for heating assistance for individuals in the county.

Chairperson Ken Walter changed the order of business as shown on the agenda. Anne Winkleman, presenter for the Chamber of Commerce had to leave the meeting early, therefore was allowed to give her report earlier in the meeting.

2. Unfinished Business:

Avery County Chamber of Commerce – Anne Winkleman (Agenda Section 5:A)

Anne Winkleman and Robin Morgan gave a review of the Chamber of Commerce dinner. The annual dinner was a great success. Ms. Winkleman reported that the chamber's Facebook followers are down, but that is typical after the Woolly Worm Festival. The chamber uses Constant Contact to send email messages to all subscribers. They track how many recipients open the email, and that is tracking at about 37%. The chamber has been contacted by American Pickers (television show) which is looking to film in North Carolina. Ms. Winkleman reviewed the specific criteria that must be met for consideration for filming.

Ken Walter presented the ad which is being considered for inclusion in the Chamber of Commerce business guide. He stated that barring any changes during the meeting, that the ad is currently the way he will present it to the Avery County Commissioners at their December 5, 2022 meeting for approval. No changes were suggested.

Jerry Moody made a motion to approve the ad for the business guide as presented. Clayton Harpold seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously. Mr. Walter noted that clerk Cindy Turbyfill has copies of the ad to pass along to the members of the board of commissioners before the meeting so that it may be reviewed. If the ad is officially approved, Ken Walter will send an email message to Anne Winkleman immediately so that she will have official approval to proceed with placing the ad in the business guide. Phillip Barrier requested assistance from the chamber of commerce in sending out an email blast to Avery County employers to gather information related to the housing study. Avery County has already received the Dogwood Trust grant for the housing study. Representatives of the Dogwood Trust should have material on the grant to us in January. Ms. Winkleman agreed to provide assistance to the county through an email blast.

A. New Business Guide Tool Box project. Phillip Barrier to report on status of Survey Monkey subscription. Kate Gavenus to report on the actual readiness of the survey.

Phillip Barrier reported that he still needs to meet with county attorney Michelle Poore to learn if we are good on the public hearing component. He will meet with her soon.

B. Phillip Barrier to report on the progress of the Great Grant, CAB Grant and American Recovery Plan funds going forward toward broadband coverage.

Phillip Barrier reported that he has no new information on the Great Grant. He reminded the group that as soon as the Great Grant is complete, work can begin on the CAB Grant and that the Avery County commissioners have pledged \$3,250,000.00 of the American Recovery Plan funding to go to broadband coverage.

C. Phillip Barrier to report on any new developments re: the proposed apartment complex at the old Lowes property.

Phillip Barrier reported that representatives are lobbying in Raleigh for federal tax grants. Federal tax grants only come about once a year, so it will be another year before more information is available. Dogwood Trust has pledged money for the project and will not take back the funding they offered.

D. Phillip Barrier to provide any updated status on the electric vehicle charging stations grant.

Mr. Barrier stated that he did not know where we currently are with the grant for the electric vehicle charging station, but that he could check with Troy Cook, who wrote the grant.

E. Phillip Barrier/Dennis Aldridge re: Occupancy Tax bill progress in the NC General Assembly.

Phillip Barrier reported that the bill is in the senate. He stated that if the bill passes, it will be a "win-win" for Avery County according to statistics on administration of vacation rentals. Dennis Aldridge reported that he has reached out to representatives Dudley Greene and Ralph Hise by email advising them that Avery County wishes to address issues that have been noted as obstacles.

F. Other

Dennis Aldridge and Phillip Barrier reported on the recent change in Tier designation for Avery County. Avery County has been a Tier II County for many years. As of December 1, 2022, Avery County will be designated a Tier III County. Many things are tied to the tier designation that will seriously impact the county. Mr. Aldridge stated that the metrics that are used for the designation are somewhat flawed, since the data was correct, but the application was wrong. One of the primary things considered was property value per capita. According to the census numbers, we have 18,000 residents in Avery County. Residents in the resort areas are not counted as residents as they are not domiciled in the county. They took the property value number and divided it by the number of year-round residents (18,000) in doing the calculations for the Tier determination. Avery County is 99th in the state, out of 100 counties, in terms of property value per capita. The residential number that they used is correct, but it is applied incorrectly. Mr. Barrier reported that in unemployment, Avery County is 90th (nine other counties have a better unemployment rate). Avery County is 52nd in average income, which is up from two years ago. According to census numbers, 2010 to 2020, Avery County shows an increase of 7 residents overall. Mr. Aldridge stated that the new tier designation will inhibit Avery County in terms of grant funding. We will be third in line for any grant funding. It will affect lottery funds to education, as well as appropriations from the legislature and many other things will be impacted. Avery County is now designated 91st overall out of 100 counties using these metrics. Avery County is now in the same category as Wake, Mecklenburg, Forsythe, New Hanover, Guilford, Brunswick and Orange Counties. Mitchell County is designated as a Tier I County. Mr. Barrier has talked with NC economic development coordinator Bill Slagle. Mr. Slagle has simply advised using the numbers to our advantage, i.e. with presentations to developers.

3. Pending Unfinished Business

A. Avery County High School & Cannon Hospital videos: Ken Walter has worked with Stephanie Greer, President at Cannon Memorial Hospital & Regional Behavioral Health Hospital on possible edits to their 7.5 minute video. Mr. Walter reported that he has spoken with Brent Ramsey of Blue Ridge Film Productions and learned that Ramsey's estimate is \$750.00 plus tax to edit the 7.5 minute video down to a usable version, approximately 90 seconds. He suggested that we put the hospital video on hold and focus on the high school video. After completion of the high school video, we may revisit the hospital video and see if the Avery County High School students would be able to work on the edits to the hospital video. *Edward Dean made a motion to postpone decisions on the hospital video until a future date. Clayton Harpold seconded, and the motion was approved unanimously.*

Ellis Ayers reported that Stephanie Watson and the video class at Avery County High School are working on a review of stock video. They are working on ideas for inclusion in the video. Mr. Ayers reported that there should be updates before the Christmas break and that material should be in production by that time.

4. New Business and/or other issues to address

A. Ken Walter's three year term conclusion coming in May 2022

Ken Walter reminded the group that his second 3 three year term will expire in May 2023. Per the charter, that is all that one can serve on the EDC. He suggested that in January when new officers are voted on, that we elect a new chairperson. That would allow Mr. Walter time to help the new chairperson and make the transition smooth. He noted that the board of commissioners could extend his term if they choose to do so.

B. Ken Walter to report on his and Dan Williams' efforts to acquire and develop 13 acre property owned by Mike Lacey in the Town of Newland for construction of affordable housing.

Mr. William's developer has decided to pursue a different project elsewhere. As Mr. Lacey remains interested in selling this property, the project has been turned over to Dave Smith and Terri Melton.

C. Ken Walter to present draft layout of the ad for the 2023 Chamber of Commerce "Business & Tourist Guide." See section two above.

D. Dave Smith and/or Terri Melton re: any new Avery County commercial real estate news. Dave Smith reported that land around the Perry House in Banner Elk has sold and may be considered for the construction of town homes and commercial establishments sometime in the future. Other projects are going on including other investors that are looking at the area. Mr. Smith stated that there are concerns regarding zoning that may impact growth in the area. He suggested brainstorming and developing ideas for moving forward. Discussion occurred regarding land use, infrastructure and the county's capability to handle growth.

6. Agricultural sub-Committee Report – Jerry Moody

Jerry Moody reported that Christmas tree sales have not been quite as good as last year. Some sellers who travel to retail lots who were already home by this time of year have had to stay at the lots to continue sales. This may be due to inflation and some people not buying trees. Also, at retail the average price of a 12' tree is \$800.00. Retail prices have been as high as we have seen. In the area of wholesale, there was a negative inventory this year. This means "if you grow it, it's going to be sold." The average wholesale price was \$46.00 per tree, or \$92,000.00 per acre. Labor for Christmas trees has been good. Farms have been staffed by H2A and transfer workers. Some "Choose & Cut" lots have already sold out.

Mr. Moody reported that on December 1, Trees for Troops would be held. Growers will contribute trees to go to various military installations. Avery County's goal is 275 trees.

Mr. Moody concluded by sharing that Avery County was happy to host the 80 foot spruce that went to the capital, and thanked Larry Smith and Dale Benfield for tree donations.

7. Education sub-Committee Report – Ellis Ayers

Ellis Ayers reported that superintendent Dan Brigman had put out a contest in the school system to come up with a new logo for the school system. He shared a copy of the logo

prepared by a student. The new logo will go on the school system's letterhead. It is similar to the county's logo and will show some consistency.

He noted that over 15 internships are taking place throughout the course of the school year. Twenty plus job shadowing programs are in place and over 30 mock interviews will be conducted with different people coming in to assist. The goal is working to engage students in "life beyond high school." The high school is working to implement the "Leader in Me" program which is based on Stephen Covey's work (Seven Habits of Highly Effective People). Covey's son put forth a book which is the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Students, which has been used at Avery County High School. The goal is to have a consistent delivery method for character and soft skills training. Mr. Ayers reported that there will be a career fair in March.

8. Marketing sub-Committee Report – Ken Walter

No report.

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

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila