

Avery County Economic Development Committee
September 29, 2020
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on September 29, 2020 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, Dave Smith, Clayton Harpold, Kate Gavenus, Dennis Aldridge (Avery County Commissioner), Melynda Pepple, Eric Berg, and Susan Siirila

Members Absent: Jerry Moody

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

(1) Approve and or amend the August 31, 2020 Meeting Minutes:

Clayton Harpold made a motion to approve the August 31, 2020 minutes as submitted. Eric Berg seconded and the motion was approved unanimously.

(2) Unfinished Business

A. Web Site Development Project Status Update – Dennis Holland, Jerry Moody, Melynda Pepple & Ken Walter:

Ken Walter reported that he is helping to facilitate communication between Dennis Holland (Avery Co. I.T. representative) and Boomer Sassmann of Big Boom Designs, Asheville, NC. Melynda Pepple stated that the EDC page will be added to the Avery County Chamber of Commerce webpage, and that Sassmann is currently working on a “facelift” for the page. Once the updated EDC page is complete, the two pages will be partnered, or added together. She will talk again with Boomer Sassmann and learn where else we can go as far as combining the two web pages. The updated EDC page (the “facelift” page) can be incorporated back to the Avery County website (www.averycountync.com). Dennis Aldridge stated that a newly updated EDC page might not look similar to the other pages, or areas, on the Avery County website, and that continuity is important. Simply, incorporating a ‘new’ EDC page on the Avery County website, with the existing pages, may not be advisable. Melynda Pepple suggested that we may add the ‘new’ EDC page to the Avery Chamber of Commerce website and leave the existing EDC page as it is on the Avery County website. Ken Walter suggested that we may have a similar format on the Avery County website and add what is currently missing. Phillip Barrier reminded the group that before any money is

expended on the webpage project, that a public hearing must occur. Ken Walter shared information regarding the Golden Leaf Company, and a service that they offer called Geo-targeting, which is basically a reverse process to a web search. Instead of visitors coming to your website, your data is sent to target groups, such as a specific geographic area. Mr. Walter will pass along webinar information to team members. If we choose to try the program, it is free for six months. Thereafter, we can stop the service if it is not working well.

B. Pool Opening Video status - The pool opening video is on the website.

C. Kate Gavenus – Mainstreet America in Newland status/progress update. Ms. Gavenus cited no changes on the Mainstreet America project. Dennis Aldridge stated that based on his research, that many vacationers (i.e. those using Air B&B) are coming to our area from a 300-mile radius.

D. Retaining Employees Workshop – To be rescheduled when it is Covid-19 safe.

(3) Phillip Barrier Updates

Phillip Barrier reported that home sales are up in Avery County. In July 2020, there were 144 home sales, compared to 88 in July 2019.

Great Grant: Mr. Barrier stated that the grant made available \$32 million for broadband expansion. Tier 2 and Tier 3 counties in North Carolina are eligible to apply for the grant, so Avery County can apply for money through the grant. The application period is open until October 14, 2020.

Sales Tax: Mr. Barrier reported that for the second, third and fourth quarters of the fiscal year, sales tax revenue is up 3.93%. Ashe County reported an increase of 6%; Watauga County reported a decrease of 0.5%. He stated that larger counties saw a decrease in sales tax revenue due to Covid-19 issues.

Fighting Hunger: Mr. Barrier stated that a new food assistance kitchen will be locating in Avery county. The agency starting the kitchen is out of Winston Salem, NC. No details are available at this time.

Dave, Phillip & Ken: Newland strip mall property development status, IRC/Structall update and old Cardinal Insurance building status:

(4) Dave Smith reported that there is not much information to add at this time. He has been in telephone contact with Greg Greene, and his group is still interested in buying the old Lowes Foods property. There must be a tenant lined up before they will purchase.

(5) New Business and/or Other Issues to Address:

A. Potential EDC member candidate list. Jesse Pope has resigned from the EDC. His resignation was effective August 2020. Phillip Barrier will run an ad in the newspaper for the volunteer position. The group will continue to look for qualified candidates.

B. Our ad in the 2021 Avery County Chamber of Commerce “Business and Visitor Guide.” Melynda Pepple reviewed last year’s advertisement in the Chamber of Commerce publication. She stated that to place the same ad that we ordered last year, the cost will be \$495.00. The ad is a half-page ad. The deadline to order an ad is November 15, 2020.

Clayton Harpold made a motion that we place the same ad that we placed in 2020 in the upcoming Business and Visitor Guide. Kate Gavenus seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

(6) Agricultural sub-Committee Report – Jerry Moody

Jerry Moody was not in attendance at the meeting, but did send materials, which Ken Walter shared with the group. Handout one was a memo from Mr. Moody noting updates from his research and information on a Kill & Chill operation grant. The second hand out was a booklet entitled “Extension & Local Government Partnerships for Economic & Community Development.” The booklet was prepared by the NC Cooperative Extension for their conference in 2016.

(7) Residential Housing sub-Committee – Eric Berg

Eric Berg shared results of his recent research with the group. He stated that there are more than 10,000 rental/vacation homes in Avery County and that 4,000 of those are long term rentals. Thirty percent of dwellings in Avery County are owner occupied. Dwellings that are rentals or vacation property have been owned by the same owner for a long period—20 years or more. New rental housing that has been built averages 1,000 square feet in size. In order to occupy such a dwelling, a renter would need to have an income of \$45,000.00 to \$55,000.00 per year. There are few incentives for people to build vacation/rental property. On the topic of tourism and recreation, the question must be asked “What can Avery County do for you?” Residents of Avery County know our businesses best. Discussion occurred regarding an occupancy tax, and the fact that in times past, business owners in the area have wanted to keep government ‘out of their business.’ Issues factoring into the lack of selling points for Avery County are lack of amenities and lack of high-speed internet in some areas. Mr. Berg stated that some ideas for amenities that might be a draw for Avery County are a soccer field or a bike path. He indicated that in some parts of the county, it does not feel like a tourist area, citing some trashy areas in the county. Discussion occurred on ideas for county-wide clean up projects or litter sweeps.

Ken Walter shared information on Viasat, which is an internet access service which is being promoted by Mountain Electric Cooperative. Viasat provides a satellite connection to homes at a discounted rate. Viasat is targeted for rural America.

Phillip Barrier showed photographs of the community room under construction at the Agricultural Extension building. It should be finished before the deadline.

The next meeting is scheduled for October 27, 2020 at the same location.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila