

Avery County Economic Development Committee
January 25, 2022
Virtual Meeting Conducted via ZOOM
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on January 25, 2022.

Present for the meeting were:

Phillip Barrier (County Manager), Susan Siirila, Dave Smith, Kate Gavenus, Clayton Harpold, Edward Dean, Anne Winkleman, Dennis Aldridge (Avery County Commissioner), Ken Walter, Angie Berry, Terri Melton, Jerry Moody and guests Eric Berg, Victoria and Jon Bowman of Structall and Neil Falvey, Avery Journal Newspaper.

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

(1) Approve and/or amend the November 30, 2021 minutes. Clayton Harpold made a motion to accept the minutes as presented. Dave Smith seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

(2) Election of officers for the 2022 calendar year:

A. Chairperson: Clayton Harpold nominated Ken Walter for the position of chairperson. Terri Melton seconded the nomination. No discussion occurred. The group voted by a show of hands. Ken Walter was unanimously elected chairperson.

B. Vice-Chairperson: Dave Smith nominated Clayton Harpold for the position of vice-chairperson. Terri Melton seconded the nomination. No discussion occurred. The group voted by a show of hands. Clayton Harpold was unanimously elected vice-chairperson.

C. Secretary: Dave Smith nominated Susan Siirila for the position of secretary. Clayton Harpold seconded the nomination. No discussion occurred. The group voted by a show of hands. Susan Siirila was unanimously elected secretary.

(3) Guest Speakers – Victoria and Jon Bowman, Structall Building Systems
Victoria & Jon Bowman recently moved to Banner Elk, NC with their sons Wyatt, age 4 and Hunter, age 8. Victoria's father began Structall in 1987. The company is based in Oldsmar, Florida. They have facilities located in San Antonio, TX and San Gabriel, LA as well. Newland NC will be their fifth location. The company produces construction materials, specifically wall panels used for both interior and exterior applications.

Structall produces structurally insulated panels made from bonded foam, a skin-on exterior. Their products, panels, snap and lock together. Other panels may look similar, but Structall's products are hand crafted and therefore the market is

much more competitive for such a quality product. Ms. Bowman stated that often their products are not familiar to contractors, who are used to building with more familiar products (lumber).

The Bowman's chose the Newland location, as they are looking to grow and expand their business. Mr. Walter inquired about the manufacture of both interior and exterior products at the Newland facility. Ms. Bowman stated that they would be manufacturing both interior and exterior materials, wall and roof products. The framing products are steel studs. Structall does not market directly to the end user, but instead markets their products to contractors. Mr. Walter inquired about challenges between the manufacturing process in Florida versus North Carolina. Jon Bowman shared that they will have installed approximately a million dollars of manufacturing equipment in the Newland facility. He referenced "warm weather" glue and stated that nothing is automated, that all their pieces are hand-crafted. Their five-year goal is to have 30-40 people running a full assembly line at the Newland facility. Newland will also be a distribution point. Currently, with costs of trucking/shipping products, companies may be somewhat limited in their sales potential. However, Victoria believes the "sky is the limit" with the Newland facility. She stated that her father basically "collects real estate" and thereby came to find the Newland building to develop. Jon Bowman shared information related to plumbing and electrical outfitting of the building. Mike Nelson (located across the street) will install water and sewer for them. They will not begin bringing in employees until bathroom facilities are functional. Once the certificate of occupancy is assigned, they will be able to go "full blast." Their goal is to have the building be a work in progress.

Victoria stated that some of their dreams/goals would be to focus on other markets such as greenhouses, tiny homes, she-sheds, as well as working with students at Avery High School and working on shop projects. They wish to put up a model at some point as well.

Structall's website address is: www.structall.com. Victoria stated that they have been working with the NCWorks Career Center & Mayland Community College as far as preparing to staff the facility. Jon Bowman added that they would welcome advice from any other sources as they get started in this area. They do plan to have a ribbon cutting and open house later on.

The guest speaker portion of the meeting concluded at 5:51 p.m.

(4) Unfinished Business

A. Anne Winkleman: Business Guide Update: Ms. Winkleman reported the cost to produce the business guide will increase this year to approximately \$30,000.00 to print, which is double the cost from last year. This is due to paper shortages. She stated that the Business Guide will be good, and she is excited about getting it out to folks.

B. Clayton Harpold: Mission Statement: Mr. Harpold reported that we are at a point where Phillip Barrier will have the mission statement reviewed for accuracy. Once that is done, the statement will go to the Board of Commissioners for approval, hopefully at the February meeting.

Clayton Harpold made a motion to adopt the mission statement based on its current context. Kate Gavenus seconded the motion. No discussion occurred. The motion was approved unanimously.

If approved at the February Board of Commissioner's meeting, the statement then becomes the working copy that the toolbox materials may be based upon.

C. Kate Gavenus to report on New Business Guide Toolbox Project: Ms. Gavenus will meet with Mr. Barrier later. She will begin to write out some survey ideas, to begin determining what types of businesses to focus on attracting.

(5) Dave Smith re. Newland strip mall property development status and pancake house update: Dave Smith reports he continues to work with a couple of real estate businesses, and that all is coming along fine. He has two contracts that he is working on. Regarding the old Lowes store, he will continue to follow up with potential buyers. Dave Smith reported that he has been working with potential tenants and trying to get some anchor stores in the facility. Mr. Smith has had two recent meetings scheduled on the matter. He will continue to follow up as needed.

(6) Ken Walter read a letter from Cindy Lindecamp, Volunteer Avery County, thanking members of the team for a charitable contribution at Christmas 2021.

(7) Anne Winkleman Chamber Updates: Ms. Winkleman reported that she is talking with the new mayor of Newland. She has about 40 vendors who would like to have a festival in June at the agricultural center. She has spoken with Kim at the ag center and dates are penciled in. She will need help with signage. She stated that it should not be a great expenditure, but that she needed to get going on the project if it is going to happen in June. This will be a Saturday & Sunday event. Ms. Winkleman and Mr. Walter will meet with the new mayor, Derek Roberts, next week. Edward Dean gave his permission to share his name as a Newland business owner who may undertake some of the suggestions brought forth by the assessment.

(8) Jerry Moody reported that Avery County Christmas tree growers sold approximately 750,000 Christmas Trees wholesale and over 25,000 Choose and Cut trees. The value of the wholesale trees was estimated at \$33,750,000.00. Choose and Cut Christmas trees amounted to over 25,000 trees sold and generated 2.5 million dollars in other associated sales (food, gas, etc.). Mr. Moody reported that his office is already getting calls about Christmas trees for the 2022 season. He stated that they are already getting to the price point where people will discontinue purchasing live trees and opting for artificial trees. There will be a tight supply of trees over the next few years.

Mr. Moody stated that individuals should expect to see an increase in food prices.

Mr. Moody stated that the Kill & Chill project came in at 6.5 million dollars. They are having to look for additional funding for the project, as it does not appear that Watauga County will come through with the difference in funding.

(9) Phillip Barrier Updates:

Mr. Barrier passed along information related to the housing assessment by the High Country Realtor's Association. The report is 402 pages. There will be a meeting on February 18, 2022 to officially release the report. He said that if he read a portion of the report correctly, it indicated that census numbers shows that our population had decreased. We are in a second-home area, which puts a strain on our market. In the way of rental housing, we need 476 units per the report. For housing sales, we need 999 units. Also, second homes are not for sale typically.

The Dogwood Trust inventory assessment is pending. The High-Country Council of Governments has sent materials to 10 groups for bids for doing the inventory. This will be a big asset to us when we get that information we can share with the realtors and builders. The other part of the grant was to be a housing study. We are holding off until the other housing study (four counties) is complete.

American Rescue Plan funding: The federal guidelines for use of the funding are available. State guidelines are more restrictive. We must follow both, and we are still learning about the guidelines.

On broadband, the Great Grant is available February 1, 2022. Companies are interested in our county. The official press release about the funding should be available by the end of the month about how companies secure funding for broadband.

We received grants through the state budget.

Mr. Barrier has had a conversation with a data center that is looking at moving to the area. 2-3 full time jobs would be created, but there would be equipment here that would be taxable.

There is no new data on the Heritage Park trail grant. Because of covid, no selections have been made on whether we may receive grant money for trail building at Heritage Park.

Discussion occurred regarding the new mayor and new town manager. The team agreed that we can remain hopeful and be supportive of new ideas that we hope to see the mayor address in the way of updates and changes for the Town of Newland. For example, beautification projects to make Newland look more like a county seat.

The next meeting will be held on February 22, 2022. Ken Walter will advise if the meeting will be virtual or in person.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:23 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila