

Avery County Economic Development Committee  
August 31, 2020  
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on August 31, 2020 at the Avery County Cooperative Extension building, located at 661 Vale Road in 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 Jerry Moody.

Members Absent: Jesse Pope and Susan Siirila

(1) Guest Speakers Presentation:

Three guest speakers participated in the meeting via video conferencing. The guests were Robert Shipley, owner/operator of Shipley Farms Beef, Eddy Labus, Extension Agent/Livestock, Watauga County and Jim Hamilton, County Extension Director of Watauga County. The speakers addressed the need for a livestock slaughter facility in the High Country area.

Following are highlights from their presentation:

- Current slaughter schedule for livestock at our closest USDA Certified facility – April 2021.
- There is the potential for a new grant to build new USDA Certified in either Watauga or Avery County. The grant opening time frame is currently unknown, the expectation is in another 2 – 4 months.
- Any chance for a new USDA Certified slaughter facility would require Avery County support. Cost to build - \$1.5 million+.
- There are two livestock producing segments – commercial and personal use.
- Currently we have 7 – 8 livestock producer farms in Avery County.
- The Northeast only produces 40% of national demand.
- Mid-west feed lots wish they were here in the Northeast.
- There is a surplus of kill & chill animals.
- One goal would be to produce our own brand – e.g. “High Country Beef”, for sale to retail outlets as a premium locally grown/sourced product.
- Production goal would be at least 25 head per week.

The business portion of the meeting began at 5:35 p.m.

## (2) Approve and/or amend the July 27, 2020 Meeting Minutes

Kate Gavenus made a motion to accept the July 27, 2020 minutes as written. Clayton Harpold seconded and the motion was approved unanimously.

--Ken Walter reported that he had received a resignation notification from Jesse Pope. Mr. Walter asked the group to begin considering candidates who may have an interest in joining the EDC. Phillip Barrier will make clerk Cindy Turbyfill aware, so that she can begin the application process.

--Discussion occurred regarding future meeting dates and location. Mr. Walter advised that we can meet in the Avery County Services Building, but that meetings could not be held in that building on Mondays. The second alternative would be to continue to meet on the last Monday of each month, but we would need to move the meeting location to the Avery County Agricultural Extension Building. The group agreed to continue to meet at the Avery County Services Building. Meetings will be held on the last Tuesday of each month, with the exceptions of holidays or other scheduled closures.

## (3) Unfinished Business

**a.** Web Site Development Project status update – Dennis Holland, Jerry, Melynda & Ken. Ken Walter reported that the Website Development project is at somewhat of a standstill. Boomer Sassmann, of Big Boom Designs, and Dennis Holland, Avery County I.T. Representative will need to meet or communicate. Mr. Walter will help facilitate their communication. Sassmann will need to learn more about the operating system currently in use in order to determine the next steps. Mr. Sassmann will provide us with a list of choices and determinations can then be made about how to move forward.

**b.** Pool Opening video status?

Phillip Barrier reported that it was his understanding that the pool opening video had been approved, but he wants to confirm with the county attorney.

**c.** Kate Gavenus re. Main Street America in Newland status/progress update.

Kate Gavenus reported no news on the Main Street America program.

**d.** Retaining Employees Workshop – to be rescheduled when it is COVID-19 safe.

Ken Walter stated that the Retaining Employees workshop will be on hold until Covid-19 is no longer an issue.

**e.** Other: Ken Walter reported that the project with Structall (manufacturing) is still moving forward. He noted that their representatives have been very specific on what they are seeking in the way of employees. This manufacturer will be located in the old IRC building in Newland. They are currently looking for contractors for building repairs. Structall produces interior walls for buildings. They anticipate opening to occur within a 6 month to 1 year timeframe. They will have a showroom for their products once they are in business.

Dennis Aldridge began a discussion regarding the housing market in Avery County at this time. He indicated that 155 properties in the county have been sold within the month of July. Dave Smith and Ken Walter spoke about property sales at Linville Land Harbor during the same period. Dave Smith suggested that individuals who may buy a property in Avery County as a seasonal home, may opt to make the property their primary residence until Covid-19 issues are over. Ken Walter noted that movement of individuals from the state of New York and other urban areas has been overwhelming. Additional discussion occurred regarding migration of individuals to rural areas.

Jerry Moody stated that he has talked with representatives regarding greenhouses, similar to the greenhouses recently erected in Yancey County. The Yancey County greenhouse project is not operational as of yet. Mr. Moody suggested that Covid-19 delays may have contributed to delays.

Kate Gavenus stated that the Town of Beech Mountain recently broke a record with income from their occupancy tax, citing a total of \$93,000.00 for one month. Discussion occurred regarding occupancy tax for Avery County. Dennis Aldridge stated that some feel it may keep vacationers from visiting the area.

Eric Berg stated that in terms of the Recreational Sub-Committee, he has spent time researching and will share his findings at a later date. He stated that regarding rental housing, that he has checked several websites, and is uncertain about what the research goal should be.

#### (4) Phillip Barrier Updates

Phillip Barrier reported that Avery County had received no federal funding for workforce housing. He stated that Cannon Memorial Hospital is expanding and adding staff, but that they are struggling to find housing for staff members.

Dave Smith stated that the parking lot at the old Lowes Foods location in Newland has been patched, and that the representatives he is working with are still interested in the property. He stated that they will not proceed, however, until there is a tenant for the property. Ken Walter added that the focus has been on a grocery store, but that the representatives are open to any other tenants.

Discussion occurred regarding Avery County's demographics, and seasonal visitors as well as visitors who come to the county for weekends only.

Ken Walter adjourned the meeting at 6:27 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila