

Avery County Economic Development Committee

June 24, 2019

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on Monday, June 24, 2019 at the Avery County Commissioners Board Room at the Avery County Administrative Complex, located at 175 Linville Street, Newland, NC 28657.

Present for the meeting were:

Susan Siirila, Ken Walter, Dave Smith, Clayton Harpold, Kate Gavenus, Dennis Aldridge (County Commissioner), Melynda Pepple, Randy Fedro (Guest), Larry Hazen (Guest) and guest speaker Chuck Abernathy of McDowell County.

Absent:

Phillip Barrier, Tim Phillips, Jesse Pope and David Pollard.

The meeting began at 5:03 pm.

A motion was made by Ms. Gavenus to approve the minutes of the May 20, 2019 meeting. A second was offered by Mr. Harpold. The motion was approved unanimously.

Mr. Hazen reported on a dinner held on June 12, 2019 at Grandfather Golf and Country Club. The dinner was prepared and served by Avery County High School students who participate in the school's culinary arts program. Mr. Hazen, who participated in the most recent Leadership Avery class, noted that the class project was to assist the culinary arts students. To that end, they developed a chef speaker series, through which chefs from around the high country gave lectures and instruction to the high school students. The dinner was developed as a fund raiser, with the intent of using the money that was raised for a scholarship for a student. Through ticket sales and donations, the fund-raising event raised \$10,000.00. Scott Garland, of Stonewalls Restaurant in Banner Elk, offered a matching donation of \$10,000.00, bringing the total for the fund-raising dinner to \$20,000.00. The EDC had appropriated \$1,000.00 to the culinary arts program, and earmarked the money for needed supplies. Mr. Hazen thanked the EDC, and stated that the money they had donated would be used in the fashion it was designed to be, with the goal of keeping kids in the county and helping them work toward careers in food service.

Mr. Walter introduced guest speaker, Chuck Abernathy.

Mr. Abernathy stated that he currently serves as the director of the McDowell Economic Development Association (MEDA). He is a full-time employee, and they have one part-time employee as well. MEDA is a non-profit agency, and it was organized in the 80's. Mr. Abernathy shared information about the organization of the agency, and stated that it is made up of 15 individuals. Their meetings are held at

7:30 am, which accommodates participants who work. Mr. Abernathy stated that MEDA is made up of a broad range of individuals, from both the public and private sector.

Mr. Abernathy stated that the workforce in McDowell County is primarily made up of manufacturing jobs. He stated that McDowell County recently had one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state, in stark contrast to having one of the highest rates several years ago during the recession.

Mr. Hazen asked Mr. Abernathy about their budget. Mr. Hazen indicated that he once served on the Avery County EDC, and that the group had a current budget of \$15,000.00, which in his opinion was insufficient. He noted that more money was required in order to get things done. Mr. Abernathy responded by stating that their MEDA group was funded by the county, and by membership.

Ms. Gavenus asked about the total budget. Mr. Abernathy indicated that their total budget is approximately \$130,000.00 to \$140,000.00, with another \$120,000.00 to \$130,000.00 from incentives. Ms. Gavenus asked about marketing. Mr. Abernathy stated that some money is spent on marketing, and is done mostly by internet.

Mr. Abernathy stated that MEDA is working to accomplish two things (1) investment and (2) employment. He stated that their focus is on large commercial establishments, and some on small commercial businesses.

Mr. Harpold asked Mr. Abernathy who the supporters of their tax base were. Mr. Abernathy responded by stating that their industry is about 35% manufacturing, and that they have some large forest product processors, noting that Ethan Allen operates a dry kiln in their county. He stated that Baxter Healthcare employees approximately 3,000 people and is one of the largest employers west of I-77.

Mr. Abernathy passed out a handout entitled "McDowell County Strategic Employment Plan Initiative." A copy is attached. He reviewed the data in the handout, shared how the data was compiled and how it is used. He suggested that goal of the EDC needs to be to focus on collaboration with other resources and agencies, with the plan of working together to address the workforce needs.

Mr. Walter advised Mr. Abernathy of the new growth in Avery County, and presented to the group a video showing the opening of the Avery County Pool.

After reviewing the video, Mr. Abernathy stated that marketing should continue, just as Phillip Barrier had done on the video, to promote family values and what the county has to offer.

Mr. Aldridge referenced the upcoming U.S. Census, and stated that population numbers can be deceiving, as some residents are aged, and some are school age children. Mr. Walter added that we have many gated communities in Avery County, where retired individuals reside, many of whom are not working, and do not have school age children. Mr. Abernathy added that Polk County is in the same situation. Mr. Aldridge noted that with the coming census numbers, we may be able to have a change in switching Avery County from a Tier 2 to a Tier 1 county. Mr. Abernathy agreed that the tier system is flawed.

Mr. Abernathy stated that in terms of his county's economic development group, some have asked him 'what are you happiest with?' He noted that the response is 'we know where we are going.' He stated that looking at economic development with this perspective can encourage us to look at resources and think financially. He suggested that we might ask for funding from businesses such as the local electric company. If such companies respond, the County Commissioners may see growth from that. Mr. Walter added that if we have the support of the County Commissioners, then we may go to potential

supporters with that as a selling point. Mr. Abernathy agreed, and stated 'yes, if the County Commissioners believe in it, you can believe in it, too.'

Mr. Abernathy went back to the above-noted handout. He stated that workforce is a priority for those looking to locate to an area. He noted that it is important to have diversity on an economic development committee, specifically noting that such a group needs representatives from the educational institutions in an area, as well as business owners, a representative from the local workforce center and others who can bring ideas. He discussed development of a demographic plan, and noted that it is important to look at who is in the workforce, and who can be moved into the workforce (example: individuals on probation, or those with disabilities).

Ms. Siirila shared that the NCWorks Career Center, located near Sandees Café, will close at the end of the week. NCWorks Career Center representatives will be housed at the Avery and Mitchell locations of Mayland Community College thereafter. It was noted that the County Manager and the County Commissioners had arranged an offer of office space at the county services building, but that the offer had been declined by High Country Council of Governments. Ms. Siirila thanked Mr. Aldridge, and included the other County Commissioners and County Manager, for the offer and their efforts to keep NCWorks Career Center services available for the residents of Avery County.

Mr. Smith gave verbal information regarding Mainstreet America, and had a printout about the agency. Mainstreet America is an organization that helps small towns and communities with problem solving, suggestions for updating existing buildings and with some grants. He noted that participation is not very expensive and could be good for Newland and perhaps some other areas in Avery County. A copy of the printout is included.

Mr. Smith also briefly noted that we can discuss the video and still photos as well, and think about how to get them out to the public.

A motion to adjourn as made by Ms. Pepple and seconded by Mr. Smith. The meeting ended at 6:17 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila

Attachments