

Avery County Economic Development Committee

July 29, 2019

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on Monday, July 29, 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:

Dennis Aldridge (County Commissioner), Randy Fedro (visitor), Jesse Pope, Clayton Harpold, Ken Walter, Susan Siirila, Kate Gavenus, Dave Smith, Eric Berg and Phillip Barrier (County Manager).

Absent: Melynda Pepple and David Pollard

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 pm by Chairperson Ken Walter.

Mr. Walter began the meeting by welcoming new EDC member Dave Smith.

A motion was made by Clayton Harpold to approve the minutes of the June 24, 2019 meeting.

A second was offered by Dave Smith and the motion was approved unanimously.

Mr. Walter noted Mr. Pollard's absence from the meeting and briefly discussed his attendance issues. Mr. Barrier stated that he knows Mr. Pollard from church. He will reach out to Mr. Pollard to inquire about his availability to continue with the EDC group. Mr. Aldridge added that Mr. Berg was elected to the group two (2) months prior, and had not attended meetings. Mr. Barrier stated that he would reach out to Mr. Berg as well regarding availability for meeting attendance.

--Mr. Berg reported to the meeting at approximately 5:15 pm.

Mr. Barrier asked about the rules regarding attendance. He stated that he could not remember if missing three (3) meetings required discussion about remaining on the committee, but said that he would check. Ms. Gavenus gave the name of Jessica Wiseman, of Linville Falls Winery, as a potential replacement if Mr. Pollard was, in fact, unable to continue with the EDC group. She added that Wiseman would be someone who is involved in agriculture, and that we needed that in the group.

Mr. Aldridge concurred and stated that he would like to see members added to the EDC group that have deep roots in the community, as they can take information back to their reference groups. Mr. Walter stated that we also need someone in the group from the educational field. Mr. Pope asked if a county employee could serve on the committee. Mr. Barrier stated that they could.

Mr. Barrier stated that at the public hearing held on July 1, 2019, the EDC budget was approved, with funding of \$6,800.00 appropriated for the EDC.

Mr. Barrier shared a thank you card with the group, which was received from the Avery County High School Culinary Arts Class for a donation the EDC gave to their program in May 2019.

There will be another NC Economic Development Partnership for Business Recruitment meeting on August 14, 2019. The program will be similar to the meeting attended by Avery EDC members last year.

On the issue of broadband internet, Mr. Barrier noted that the availability of broadband had helped finalize the sale of a house in the Linville Falls area. Similarly, Mr. Barrier noted that the lack of internet in a development located near Blevins Creek Road in Newland had hindered the sale of two houses. The development near Blevins Creek Road is Cranberry Creek. Charter Communications runs internet to the gate, but does not run past that point, thereby making internet unavailable for the houses in the development.

Mr. Barrier stated that a representative of Senator Thom Tillis' office had visited Avery County, and that he shared with the representative that affordable internet for everyone in the county was an important issue.

Mr. Barrier stated that the Reconnect grant money is the grant that Skyline/Skybest has applied for, and been turned down on, three times. The Community Connect grant money is pending, and all we can do is wait to see who gets it. Mr. Barrier reminded the group that the county can 'cheerlead' but cannot have input on who may receive the grant.

Mr. Barrier shared a copy of Blue Ridge Magazine, which features Avery County as number three in the top places to visit in North Carolina.

Mr. Barrier noted that the Avery County Fair will be held September 4 – September 7 this year. He noted that more towns will be involved this year, having tables and displays available.

Mr. Barrier talked briefly about the fairgrounds and the area near the new agricultural building. He stated that there will be a trail system, a community building (recently approved by the County Commissioners), and many good additions to the area soon.

Mr. Walter extended a welcome to new EDC member Eric Berg.

Mr. Barrier pointed out that the water bottles, made available to group members for consumption during the meeting, bore the Avery County logo. Mr. Berg stated that he had heard positive responses from non-Avery County individuals regarding the logo.

Mr. Aldridge stated that he saw the property near the agriculture building as a diamond in the rough. He noted that the area has great potential, and that potential was the reason the County Commissioners had approved the construction of a community building on the property. He stated that such a building could serve as an anchor point. Mr. Barrier added that the community building will be able to accommodate 280 people, and can be used for weddings, meetings, or other large gatherings and will be able to offer both an indoor and outdoor stage.

Mr. Walter asked Ms. Gavenus and Mr. Pope to report on the economic summit that they attended in May. Mr. Pope noted that he was not able to attend, and that only Ms. Gavenus participated. Ms. Gavenus stated that it was a good meeting, and that one of the speakers was Pat Mitchell of the North Carolina Department of Commerce. She added that Bill Slagle, regional EDC representative, was in attendance, and that she estimated that there were about 120 people at the meeting. She stated that it was good to get together with people from other counties, and learn what they are doing particularly in terms of recruitment and retention of employees.

Mr. Barrier stated that in his talks with business owners in the area, that it is clear that one of the biggest frustrations of employers is retention of staff. Ms. Gavenus stated that at the summit, a person who was successful with retention spoke of some of the things they did to retain staff. One example was giving workers their child's birthday off.

Mr. Pope stated that everyone has to be creative in developing benefits that can help with retention of staff. He stated that at Grandfather Mountain, employees are given five weeks of paid time off each year. Employees are allowed to use the time as they choose, and they can carry time over to cover snow days.

Ms. Gavenus noted that at her workplace, birthdays and successes are celebrated and efforts are made to encourage employees.

Mr. Barrier asked the group if we should host an informational meeting on the subject of retention of staff. The group agreed that it would be a good idea to pursue. Discussion followed regarding locations that would be available for such a summit meeting, and individuals who may be able to assist.

Mr. Pope stated that he had been involved with such a project in the past, and recommended that we reach out to Jim Swinkola of Grandfather Home for Children and Sam Stephenson of Lees-McRae College, who put together the summit meeting that he was a part of. Mr. Pope described the summit meeting, and basically indicated that it was interactive, with four or five tables, speakers, etc. and that visitors could move about and talk with presenters during the program. Mr. Berg asked if the focus was to be on seasonal employees. Mr. Pope responded, and stated that the focus should be on retaining seasonal and non-seasonal staff as well.

Mr. Aldridge stated that such a summit meeting would be great for public relations for the county. He stated that he remembered being surprised to learn that wages did not rank number one on the list of what people seek in the way of job satisfaction. He stated that he felt this was a change with young people today versus how it was when he was first out of school.

Mr. Walter asked Mr. Aldridge if the county could pay the bill for food to be served at such a meeting. Mr. Barrier stated that the county could probably do something in the way of helping with this.

Mr. Walter stated that he recalled Lees-McRae College president Mr. King stating that he wanted to reach out to the community. He suggested that having the summit meeting at Lees-McRae College may be something that we would want to pursue. Ms. Gavenus suggested the Avery County Library in Newland as a possible location.

Mr. Berg indicated that he agreed with Mr. Aldridge that young people may have different priorities today regarding work satisfaction. He noted that we are in a gig economy, where we see no loyalty to employers. He added that in times where we have seen a downturn in the economy, often employers laid off workers, and that labor unions were the only things that prevented lay-offs in some situations, but nationally unions have been & remain in decline. Mr. Pope agreed, noting that it was not just millennials, but workers across the spectrum who may

want fulfillment at work beyond a paycheck. Discussion followed regarding perks made available to workers by various employers which included paternity leave, time off for snow days, bringing children to work on snow days, etc.

Mr. Smith suggested that we work toward finding ways to bring groups of workers together. For example, workers who work in the ski industry in the winter, being brought together with summer employers such as golf courses during the summer months.

Mr. Walter recognized visitor Tommy Burleson. Mr. Burleson was available to visit the EDC meeting, as the Avery County Planning Board was not meeting at their usual time. Mr. Burleson offered some comments on the Avery County economy, speaking specifically about the lack of manufacturing jobs, which we once had when facilities such as Owens-Brigham manufacturing operated in Avery County.

Mr. Pope asked Ms. Gavenus if we had an economic summit meeting, as we were discussing, if she believed Pat Mitchell would speak at it. Ms. Gavenus stated that she thought she would.

Mr. Barrier recommended waiting until March 2020 to hold the economic summit meeting.

Mr. Berg asked about the percentages of male to female workers in Avery County. Ms. Siirila responded, and stated that there are a greater number of females working in Avery County than males. Mr. Berg asked for the reason, and stated that females needed to be encouraged to move into the workplace. He asked if daycare availability was a restriction. Ms. Siirila advised that available transportation was more of an issue than daycare for female workers in Avery County, noting the Avery County Transportation vans only run during day shift hours, Monday through Friday. Mr. Harpold and Mr. Pope suggested alternatives such as Uber and Lift. Mr. Harpold referenced Appalcart in Watauga as a public transportation agency that offered more hours than Avery County Transportation does. Ms. Siirila stated that individuals who may work lower paying second shift jobs, i.e. fast food jobs, could not afford Uber or something similar for transportation to and from work.

Mr. Berg asked what alternatives working parents (mothers) may have available in Avery County that would enable them to move into, or remain in, the workforce. Mr. Pope shared that some alternatives include programs at the YMCA and some after-school programs at schools throughout the county. Mr. Aldridge talked about costs and stringent regulations required for starting and operating a daycare center.

Mr. Barrier shared his thoughts on needed law changes related to working parents who may 'work themselves out of' assistance through agencies such as the Department of Social Services. He gave an example of a working mother who progressed in her job to the point where her subsidies from DSS were cut. This, he said, hinders individuals from getting, and excelling, in jobs when they know that to do so will hinder their receipt of benefits.

Mr. Walter stated that he will talk with the staff at the Avery County Library regarding use of their conference room for the economic summit meeting. Mr. Pope suggested forming a sub-committee to work on planning the meeting. All EDC members offered their services for such a committee.

Mr. Walter stated that he will communicate with instructor Teila Terrell at Avery County High School regarding scheduling the next Junior Achievement program.

Mr. Smith stated that we need to secure photographs of the new pool, health department after renovations, etc. He will get his neighbor to assist with placing the photos in the High Country News. Mr. Walter will forward the photographs to Dennis Holland and facilitate getting them posted on the website.

Mr. Walter stated that we will need to discuss the next video, and where we want to film it, at the next meeting.

Mr. Barrier thanked Mr. Smith for his hard work on projects related to bringing retail establishments into the county, and for all the efforts he puts into building the Avery County economy.

The next meeting is planned for August 26, 2019.

A motion to adjourn was offered by Mr. Pope, and seconded by Mr. Harpold. The meeting adjourned at 6:08 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila