

Avery County Economic Development Committee

February 25, 2019

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on Monday, February 25, 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: Ken Walter, Susan Siirila, Phillip Barrier, Jesse Pope, Lesley Platek (visitor), Randy Fedro (visitor), Kate Gavenus, Dave Smith (visitor), Carmen Lacey, Melynda Peple, David Pollard, Dennis Aldridge, Clayton Harpold, Hall Young (visitor).

The meeting began at 5:01 pm and was moderated by chairperson Ken Walter.

Mr. Walter welcomed newly appointed EDC member, Kate Gavenus. The other newly appointed member, Mike Reese, was unable to attend due to his work schedule.

Mr. Walter asked for a motion to approve the minutes of the January 28, 2019 minutes. A motion was made by Ms. Lacey, seconded by Ms. Peple and approved unanimously.

Election of Officers

Chairperson: Ms. Lacey made a motion for Mr. Walter to continue in the position of chairperson. A second was offered by Mr. Pope. The motion was approved unanimously.

Vice-Chair: Ms. Gavenus nominated Mr. Harpold for vice-chair. A second was offered by Ms. Lacey and the motion was approved unanimously.

Secretary: Ms. Lacey nominated Ms. Siirila for the position of secretary. A second was offered by Mr. Pope and the motion was approved unanimously.

Mr. Walter introduced visitor Lesley Platek, of Grandfather Mountain, to the group. She was accompanied by Larry Hazen, former EDC board member.

Ms. Platek spoke about her participation with Leadership Avery. She stated that one of the things the Leadership Avery group was tasked with was involvement with a project that would give back to the community. The project that they selected was the culinary arts program at Avery County High School. Ms. Platek stated that she had been in the hospitality industry for forty years, and that her spouse is employed at Grandfather Golf and Country Club. She stated that she has worked toward getting a chef speaker series in place to help with instruction of students in the culinary arts program at Avery County High School. She explained that she has

spoken with chefs in the area who have agreed to speak and/or teach basic skills to the students. She stated that the chef at Grandfather Golf and Country Club had advised her that some basic skills, such as knife skills, can make the difference between someone being placed in a \$10.00 per hour job versus a \$15.00 per hour job. She stated that chefs in the area travel to places like south Florida to recruit staff. This could change if local individuals were trained and able to move into kitchen positions in the Avery County area. She has worked with Tina at Reid's Café and Catering in Banner Elk. The plan is from now through June for chefs to give demonstrations, or instruction, to students and perhaps recruit students for job openings.

Leadership Avery will do a fundraiser dinner at Grandfather Golf and Country Club, with five students cooking and 5 students serving. The dinner will raise money for culinary scholarships. Also, money is needed to add to the budget for the culinary arts program at Avery County High School. Some purveyors are donating food products for the dinner. The dinner will be held in June and advertising for the event will begin in April. Only 80 seats will be available for guests at the dinner. Ms. Platek stated, however, that this is not a 'one and done.' She stated that this is the first of other such events that she hopes to see happen to aid the students in the culinary arts department at the high school. She stated that she also hopes to see the chef speaker series be one of the things that will get kids excited about job opportunities in food service. Mr. Walter stated that young adults who participate may go to work in food service, move up the ladder, and have the opportunity to hire others in the future, which would be a long-term benefit. Mr. Aldridge stated that he approved of the concept, especially since it will offer young people the opportunity to learn about jobs that they may not have been aware of. He stated that such a program may also help break the 'us and them' concept that individuals may have about workplaces in gated communities in Avery County.

Ms. Platek stated that Scott Garland, of Stonewalls in Banner Elk, will be the keynote speaker at the dinner.

Mr. Walter thanked both Ms. Platek and Mr. Hazen. Mr. Hazen stated that our goals should continue to be raising the economy in Avery County, and looking at what we need to do to keep young people in the area. He added that any funding for the above-noted project would be helpful.

Mr. Barrier stated that county employees, who work in human resources, had attended a seminar in Asheville recently. At the seminar, they spoke with representatives of Grandfather Golf and Country Club, and learned that there will be approximately 225 job openings at Grandfather Golf and Country Club for the upcoming summer season.

Mr. Barrier noted that Grandfather Mountain had record attendance during the month of January. Mr. Pope confirmed that, and stated that Grandfather Mountain recorded record-breaking wind of 124 mph over the past weekend.

Mr. Walter introduced guest Hall Young, of Hall's Hill Farm.

Mr. Young shared information about himself and his farm. He stated that his farm produces pork, beef, chicken, eggs and vegetables. They sell products in both retail and wholesale markets. He stated that most of their wholesale business occurs in Mitchell and Yancey

counties. Mr. Barrier briefly discussed the proposed Arts, Crafts & Agriculture Marketplace, and asked Mr. Young if he thought such a market would be viable, or something that would help grow his business. Mr. Young stated that it would be good, as it could bring to the table other farmers who produce vegetables. He stated that those who farm vegetables generally do not do very well with farmers markets, such as the one in Banner Elk. He stated that most of the people who visit the farmers market in Banner Elk are tourists who are in the area for a short time. He added that some local residents visit the market, but not enough to sustain it. He stated that he believed, though, that the market was there. Ms. Lacey asked Mr. Young about his production capacity. He stated that he basically turned a hobby into a business. He stated that he started with pork production, then added beef and chicken. Later, he began filling holes in the market with vegetables. He stated that he had a 30x72 high tunnel (growing house), and that he had the area, or land, where he could add up to four more tunnels. Ms. Lacey asked Mr. Young if he marketed products to the resort communities, noting that it would be a great selling point. Mr. Young stated that he currently did not.

Mr. Walter stated that the flip side of this would be to focus on farm to table, which is popular right now. He stated that we have people in the area who would like to buy products with farm to table in mind.

Mr. Young shared that he had partnered with Kaye's Kitchen in Newland in the past. He provided products such as squash, zucchini and salad mix to the restaurant. This resulted in people, thereafter, going to the farmers market.

Mr. Pollard asked Mr. Young what his biggest hurdles were. He replied that finding help and the weather were his biggest issues. He stated that hiring trustworthy, professional workers was difficult. He added that he had reached out to instructors at Avery County High School, Parlier and Krege, for assistance in finding student workers. He had no response. Mr. Pollard asked Mr. Young if he wished to sell more products. Mr. Young stated that he did, and that he felt the potential was there. He added that he currently sells products to four restaurants in the Spruce Pine area. Mr. Pollard asked Mr. Young who his best customers were. Mr. Young stated that retail customers were his best customers, and that CSA's were not as good as retail, such as farmers markets in Avery, Mitchell and Yancey counties. Mr. Young stated that he has the capacity to serve, or sell products to, more restaurants.

Ms. Lacey stated that Mr. Young might need to know a sales base before his crops were ready. Mr. Young stated that was not necessarily true, because he has the capability to adjust since his operation is still relatively small. Mr. Pope noted that the country clubs in the area would be a good market to reach out to.

Mr. Lacey asked Mr. Young if his products were organic. He stated that they were not, that his farm was not certified as organic.

Mr. Aldridge asked Mr. Young if he foresaw any issues with regulatory restraints from governmental agencies. Mr. Young replied that he did not. He stated that he has 'jumped through hoops' in the past, and that certification is not required for selling products to restaurants. He added that some outlets, such as BlueBox, may have more constraints, and

added that some regulations apply to how food products are treated before sale (example: whole carrots vs. cut carrots). Mr. Pollard spoke about organic vs. responsibly raised products. Mr. Young stated that he does not use sprays, and that he does opt for organic medications for his animals. He stated that for vegetables, that his farm cannot be certified organic.

Ms. Pepple offered a copy of the new Chamber of Commerce business guide, and pointed out that all local restaurants are listed therein.

Mr. Barrier asked Mr. Young if he believed that another farmers market, maybe located at the new agricultural building, would work. Mr. Young stated that was a tough question. Ms. Lacey stated that it may depend on who the people were that would be marketed to. She added that the focus might need to be on people in the gated communities, or seasonal people.

Mr. Young stated that regarding the start-up of a market in the Crossnore area would require a lot of work, and would be more than one farmer could do alone. He stated that it was tricky when you have multiple markets, as people could get their feelings hurt, and that there was some splintering of business.

Mr. Barrier asked Mr. Young what his best market area was. Mr. Young replied that it was Mitchell County. Mr. Pollard asked how much better; Mr. Young replied that dollar-wise, Mitchell County was four times better than Avery County.

Mr. Walter asked Mr. Young if he felt that an Arts, Crafts & Agriculture Marketplace, as discussed earlier, would work. Mr. Young replied 'yes.'

Mr. Pollard stated that co-ops may make a difference, and noted that it would be interesting to see how co-ops would impact farmers markets.

Mr. Young stated that in Avery County, Banner Elk in particular, vacationers were generally here for 1-3 weeks, and that they typically do not cook their own food.

Mr. Pope noted that at some of the clubs, or gated communities, that there are over two-thousand people who are in the area for a period of a few months. He added that they, or their private cooks, prepare food in their homes. He stated that he was of the belief that those individuals would be interested in buying responsibly raised, local food products.

Mr. Young stated that he is on the local farmers market board in Avery County. He noted that he believes that marketing changes may be difficult.

Mr. Pope stated that it would be good to advertise, or market, in newsletters. He stated that reminders, locations, etc. of local farmers markets could be put in newsletters and that would be a good starting point for advertising farmers markets in the area. Ms. Lacey asked if this would be a thing that would have to be approved by the farmers market board. Mr. Young stated that he did not know. He added that there are currently no board members who focus on marketing, website updates, Facebook updates, etc. He stated that advertising in Harbor Lights (newsletter for Linville Land Harbor) was mentioned at a board meeting, and tabled thereafter with no other activity. Mr. Barrier asked Mr. Young how many people were on the farmers market board. He replied "five."

Mr. Walter stated that he agreed with Mr. Pope, and added that some residents at Linville Land Harbor are in the area for one, two or three months and that they cook their own food. He stated that advertising in the Harbor Lights newsletter would be a good idea.

Ms. Pepple stated that the Avery County Farmers Market was listed in the Chamber of Commerce Business Guide as a courtesy, and that it was also listed on the website.

Ms. Gavenus noted ways to get free advertising, such as newsletters for the Town of Beech Mountain and the Club at Beech Mountain.

Mr. Walter thanked Mr. Young for participating in the meeting and added that local agriculture is, and has always been, high on the list of priorities of the Avery County Commissioners.

Mr. Walter stated that a developer has spoken with him and with Mr. Barrier, and that the developer may be interested in the IRC building, or perhaps the strip mall (old Lowes Foods location). He stated that this was in the early phases, and that Dave Smith may help them move forward. Mr. Walter added that the developer learned of the properties through a visit to the Avery County website.

Mr. Barrier, Ms. Pepple and Mr. Walter will attend a workshop: Essentials of Economic Development. Mr. Barrier will report back to the group after the workshop.

Mr. Barrier noted that he had received a NC State Aviation brochure, and that Avery County's airport is listed in the brochure as having \$20 million in income. Mr. Aldridge stated that the Avery County airport is an untapped resource, with much potential. Mr. Barrier added that a grant has been received and will be used to building a terminal. He stated that lengthening a runway is also something that needs to be done.

Mr. Barrier stated that he needs to turn in budget information to the county commissioners before the next EDC meeting. He suggested that we basically leave the budget for the EDC as it is. He added that if we have a project come up that would require more money than we have in our EDC budget, that we could go to the county commissioners and request a budget amendment. Mr. Barrier asked Ms. Gavenus if she concurred. She stated that she did, and that it would be a good idea to have something specific before requesting more money from the county. She added 'I think we're good, as long as we have flexibility.' Other members of the group agreed.

Mr. Walter asked Mr. Barrier if we decided to proceed with the plans for an Arts, Crafts & Agriculture Marketplace, if we could present a request for funding to the county commissioners when we had some hard numbers. Mr. Barrier stated 'yes.'

Mr. Walter asked the group for feedback on the proposed draft of goals to be presented to the county commissioners. A copy of the document is attached.

Specifically, Mr. Walter asked what items (goals) we wanted to take to the county commissioners. He added that in looking at goals such as updates at Avery County High School, we want to move forward and not delay on important opportunities in the county.

Mr. Pollard asked Mr. Walter what the responses had been from group members about reaching out to the gated communities. Mr. Walter stated that one of the goals in reaching out to people in the gated communities was basically to say 'If you have a child or a grandchild who may be potential entrepreneurs, they may want to look at Avery County as a place to locate their business.' He gave Linville Land Harbor as a potential place to hold meetings or give presentations to individuals who may be, or know, entrepreneurs who may locate a business in Avery County.

Ms. Lacey stated that some of the individuals in the gated communities expect 'wine & cheese.' She noted that there may be a few people in the gated communities who are interested in the community, but that we should take care not to 'spin wheels' and spend money on projects that will not produce much of an outcome.

Mr. Pope stated that in the gated communities, there are several year-round people and that they do support community activities, such as Yellow Mountain Enterprises and Feeding Avery Families.

Mr. Pollard stated that there are people in the gated communities who have been in all different sorts of business, and that we may have the potential for a 'think tank' scenario, where we could ask for the expertise of successful people in these communities.

Ms. Lacey agreed that we could seek expertise from business professionals in the gated communities. Mr. Smith concurred. He stated that people in the gated communities may have many people seeking money, but that seeking advice may be better—going for an informational approach rather than simply asking for money. Mr. Walter asked if the focus should be to ask for expertise on specifics, such as the Arts, Crafts & Agriculture Marketplace. Mr. Pollard and Mr. Pope agreed that it would be acceptable. Mr. Pope added that it would be important to build relationships, and approach people with knowledge and expertise in our areas of interest.

Mr. Walter noted that we have underscored the diversity of the EDC. Mr. Smith added that most people do want to help others. Ms. Lacey indicated that we do not have an 'easy sell' such as agencies like Feeding Avery Families have, and that we must hone our message starting with the development of the arts and crafts Arts, Crafts & Agriculture Marketplace. Mr. Walter agreed, and stated that we must know where we stand with the county commissioners. He went back to the handout and asked if it had merit. The group agreed that it did. Mr. Walter stated that he would amend it and get it ready to forward to the county commissioners and that he looked forward to a joint meeting between the EDC and county commissioners.

The next meeting is scheduled for March 25, 2019.

A motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Pepple, and seconded by Mr. Harpold. The meeting adjourned at 6:00 pm.

Discussion occurred following adjournment regarding expenditures from our advertising budget. Mr. Barrier noted that we set aside \$2,600.00 for advertising, that we have spent \$500.00, and that at our next meeting we could decide how to use remaining funds. Mr. Pope suggested focusing some monies on the dinner to benefit the culinary arts department at Avery County High School. He suggested perhaps purchasing a table, and that the EDC could get recognition therefrom. Additionally, a donation could be made to benefit the program. Mr. Walter advised Mr. Barrier that another installment of the Junior Achievement program will begin soon, and that supplies will cost \$150.00. Mr. Barrier noted that \$300.00 has been set aside for the Junior Achievement program. He advised Mr. Walter that it would simply require billing the county for the products.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila

Your Avery County EDC recently reflected back on our accomplishments - since our inception in May 2017 and we now feel it imperative that we work with the Board of Commissioners to generate a strategic plan or goal(s) to go forward. To this end we developed a list of 17 questions, ideas and suggestions [attached under separate cover]. While our overall goal is economic development for all of Avery County we felt that the southern part of the county was most in need and Newland as our county seat was therefore deserving of any initiative. The long term goal is the presentation of Avery County as the ideal location & business environment where an entrepreneur would want to locate a business, reside and raise a family. We met on January 28th. and February 25th. to review this list and additional ideas and have agreed on three (3) such economic development concepts.

1. The development of an Arts, Craft & Agricultural Products Market as an anchor for this economic development effort. Such a facility appropriately marketed would serve to present all of Avery County accordingly.
2. Pitch to gated community members our Avery County business opportunities and county needs, in the hope of enlisting interest and/or support.
3. Avery County High School Culinary Program support, re. Ms. Lesley Platek's presentation to the EDC at our February 25th. meeting.

In spite of our countries efforts to re-shore our lost manufacturing, the prospects for Avery County being a participant in this process by attracting new and/or expanding manufacturing or a large commercial operation are not realistic expectations. Thus the need to be bold, proactive, not risk adverse and with the understanding that we need to take the initiative, it will not come knocking at our door.

Bear in mind that while we make these recommendations, we exist to serve the Board of Commissioners, thus the need to meet and mutually agree on a goal(s), implementation plan, Board of Commissioners support commitment, timeline and measurement of success/failure.

That said we respectfully present these to you for your consideration.

EDC Meeting January 28, 2019 – Economic Development Questions for BoC

Carmen:

1. What are the top 2 or 3 measures of success that you have for the EDC? When you think about these measures, is there data to show the current state so the EDC can demonstrate improvement?
2. When thinking about a 3-5 year plan for EDC, what do you envision?

Melynda:

1. High Speed Internet for the county- at least most of it.
2. At least 2 major manufactures back in the county.
3. Old Lowes complex filled.
4. Old TRW Building filled- not sure if that is the correct name- corner where you turn in the High School.
5. Sidewalk system in Newland and create the small town effect in Newland since it is our county seat.

Clayton:

1. Is there interest to develop opportunities for service industry/entrepreneurship that allows for individuals to develop their crafts and services?
2. Is there coordination between the High Country Workforce Development Board and the possibilities of economic development in Avery County?
3. Does Avery County look at linkages with Mayland Community College Small Business Center and the MAY coalition for opportunities for opportunities that entrepreneurs need?

Ken:

1. Do the BoC's accept the limited probability of attracting medium to large manufacturing or commercial companies?
2. Should the focus be on southern Avery County? If "Yes" should Newland be the anchor?
3. If Newland is the anchor should the focus be on: History/heritage = Avery County Museum, Agri-tourism = Co-op Extension & fairgrounds?
4. BoC opinion on having an Arts/Crafts & Market as a Newland destination anchor?
5. BoC opinion on opening/facilitating Newland to attract a brew pub?
6. What level of financial commitment and support – short & long term, can the EDC expect to insure we can successfully achieve our economic development goals?
7. If new business and or business growth tax deferments are not permitted what "grant" options are available?
8. Is the county willing to advertise to inform/attract local entrepreneurs – re. EDC goal opportunities?