

Avery County Economic Development Committee

January 28, 2019

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on Monday, January 28, 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: Melynda Pepple, Kate Gavenus, Tim Phillips, Susan Siirila, Ken Walter, Clayton Harpold, Dennis Aldridge, David Pollard, Carmen Lacey, Phillip Barrier & Randy Fedro (visitor: Positive Parenting Program).

Absent: Jesse Pope.

The meeting began at 5:03 pm, and was moderated by chairperson Ken Walter.

Melynda Pepple made a motion to approve the minutes of the January 14, 2019 meeting; a second was offered by Clayton Harpold. The motion was approved unanimously.

Mr. Barrier reported that he and Tommy Burleson had talked with TVA for a possible venture that would impact economic development in Avery County. He noted that TVA is seeking a site ready for 20-100 megawatts of power, and that the conversation went well.

Mr. Barrier stated that the Avery County Board of Commissioners will approve two new members for the EDC. Four applications were submitted.

Mr. Barrier stated that in working on strategic planning, that he has visited Beech Mountain and Sugar Mountain. He has done so to work on job creation and to determine how we can promote ourselves. Specifically, he noted that in talks with representatives at Beech Mountain, their concerns were seasonality of jobs, and how to retain staff (what to do with workers in the off season). Mr. Barrier has more meetings planned and will report additional findings to the EDC later.

Mr. Walter stated that the main focus of the meeting today was to determine goals to present to the Board of Commissioners.

What will the Board of Commissioners do to support EDC efforts?

Mr. Phillips and Mr. Aldridge were asked to respond. Mr. Phillips stated that broadband was still a concern, as was retaining workers in the area.

Mr. Aldridge stated that regarding strategic planning, there is a form on the Avery County website which could be used to secure information from many individuals. He also stated that a goal should be to move from generalities to specifics. He called this 'painting with a broad brush' and stated that he hopes the EDC can move from concepts to specific goals, i.e. 'we need more for young people' then what specifically do we want?

Mr. Walter stated that when we sit down with the Board of Commissioners, we want specific, measurable, achievable goals. Mr. Aldridge and Mr. Barrier agreed.

Mr. Walter noted that we may all agree that broadband is important, but that the EDC cannot do much toward that end. Mr. Barrier agreed that the county cannot do much but 'cheerlead.' It can, however, partner with other agencies such as the Chamber of Commerce to work toward installation of broadband internet. He noted that the county and the Chamber of Commerce have worked for two years toward getting a \$100,000.00 grant for broadband. Ms. Lacey noted that more than \$100,000.00 in resources/capital may have been used over a two-year period in trying to secure the grant. She stated that one must think what the cost will be when going after a grant. She gave an example of the Appalachian Regional Commission, and noted that if the award is not great, you may not come out in the long run.

Mr. Walter questioned Mr. Aldridge and Mr. Phillips: Do you feel that the north part of the county is doing well? Should we focus on the southern part of the county?

Mr. Aldridge stated that he was hesitant to make a line of demarcation. He stated that we need a comprehensive plan that will benefit everyone. He stated that he would hesitate to focus on the southern part of the county. There was general agreement that our goal was economic development for all of Avery County, but one of our suggested goals targets the Newland area.

Mr. Walter stated that when we talk about the potential for an arts/crafts marketplace, what we would need is a targeted facility. Mr. Phillips stated that to do so would be a good idea. He added that some parts of the county have things that other parts of the county do not. He stated that it would be important to help the whole county. Mr. Walter stated that if an arts/crafts marketplace were successful in Newland, that it might signal a revitalization of Newland and become an anchor for entrepreneurs. Mr. Barrier agreed.

Mr. Walter asked if we wished to make the establishment of an arts/crafts marketplace a goal to be presented to the Board of Commissioners. Ms. Lacey noted that if she were on the Board of Commissioners, her question would be "what do you need from us?" Mr. Walter responded by noting that the EDC could then say to the Board of Commissioners "what kind of support can you give us?" Ms. Lacey stated that in the absence of other goals, it would be a reasonable goal to present to the Board of Commissioners.

Mr. Barrier stated that there would be a group of volunteers who would man the marketplace. Ten percent of what is sold would be kept for overhead, and all the labor would be volunteer. Mr. Aldridge added that this idea goes along well with plans for the new agriculture building.

Mr. Barrier questioned Ms. Lacey: Would we be competing with private enterprise? Ms. Lacey responded by stating "you are not profiting." Mr. Barrier agreed, and stated that we would simply be trying to help people get on their feet. Mr. Walter and Mr. Pollard gave an example of the sale of apples. Mr. Pollard suggested polling people who may be interested in selling their crops/wares at a marketplace to see how many might be interested.

Mr. Aldridge stated that regarding a marketplace, a truly successful model would be a mix of public and private resources. He stated that the county can provide a genesis for this, but sustainability will come from private sources. He noted that the ultimate goal should be for it to become private at some point. Discussion followed regarding marketing/advertising, with ideas such as Facebook, radio swap-shop, etc. being set forth.

Mr. Walter stated that our first goal, then, would be to present the idea of a marketplace. Mr. Pollard asked what we were asking for. Mr. Walter responded by stating that our task would be to give the Board of Commissioners a list of five, six, or seven goals for review. Then, the Board of Commissioners could say “we have selected these three...” for example, then the EDC could talk about how to develop same. Also, he noted that we could ask about budgeting. Ms. Lacey stated that it would be important to ask Mayland Community College (small business center) for help as well. Mr. Aldridge gave the example of the “bean market” that existed once in Crossnore, plus a similar market at Smokey Straight—both were the same concept.

Mr. Walter referenced the Home & Harvest Festival, held last year in Newland. He stated that we could be at the next festival promoting our efforts.

Mr. Walter asked about the potential for a brew pub in Newland. Mr. Barrier asked what role county government would play in that. Mr. Barrier stated that he thought it might pass, but that it would be up to the town board. Mr. Aldridge stated that he did not believe the idea would go over well with the Board of Commissioners. Ms. Gavenus stated that the sale of spirits could be beneficial, but it would have to be up to the community. Mr. Harpold stated that he thought the ideas of a marketplace and brew pub were good, and likened them to recent development in Burnsville, noting the development of the town square in Burnsville.

Mr. Pollard spoke about Pinebridge in Spruce Pine, and the proposed goals to remodel and portion the larger building out to more than one occupant. He asked about the Lowes Foods building in Newland, and if the same thing could be done with that building. Mr. Walter stated that there are rumors of a national corporation looking at the Lowes Foods building, and perhaps dividing the space. Ms. Siirila added that these examples are reminiscent of a business incubator. Ms. Gavenus stated that when a business incubator was attempted before that there was no support, no centralized management.

Mr. Walter spoke about drawing larger businesses to the Avery County area, and noted that issues in doing so would be broadband, traffic, transportation, lack of available labor. Ms. Siirila agreed that the lack of an available labor force is an issue. Mr. Walter stated that we are surrounded by people who have money that could be our target market.

Mr. Harpold spoke about a potential market for those households in the area with a higher income, specifically, personal chefs, concierge, personal shoppers, etc. He noted that we are a service industry in Avery County. Mr. Aldridge noted that there are many workers in the area that do similar work, and that it is often not trackable (cash). He noted that out of the box ideas related to service work are where things can start and change—he gave the example of Concho Taxi from several years ago.

Mr. Barrier questioned Ms. Lacey about the needs of Cannon Memorial in the way of service work. She noted that things like laundry, etc. are already in place, and that she did not expect to see a need for outside services for the hospital.

Mr. Pollard spoke about retention of staff. He stated that he pays a portion of his staff a salary, and pays them throughout the off-season weeks in order to keep his staff in place. He gave an example, or idea, regarding farmers perhaps contracting with ski areas in order to form a partnership through which workers could have work throughout most of the year. Ms. Siirila noted differences in how unemployment insurance is paid now, versus how it paid over previous years when many in the

Avery County workforce worked for a portion of the year, and drew unemployment insurance benefits for the remainder of the year. Discussion followed regarding coordination of employers.

Mr. Walter introduced visitor Dave Smith, who joined the meeting after it was underway. Mr. Smith shared his background information with the group.

Ms. Lacey recommended an expedited push to get goals completed and to the Board of Commissioners by their March 2019 meeting.

The next meeting is scheduled for February 25, 2019.

Ms. Lacey made a motion to adjourn at 6:12 pm. It was seconded by Ms. Pepple and approved.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila