

Avery County Economic Development Committee
September 24, 2018
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on Monday, September 24, 2018 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, Larry Hazen, Kate Gavenus, Melynda Pepple and Carmen Lacey.

Absent were: Tim Phillips, Trey Oakley, Jesse Pope and David Pollard.

The meeting began at 5:05 pm and was moderated by Chairperson Ken Walter.

A motion was made by Ms. Lacey to approve the minutes of the August 27, 2018 meeting. A second was offered by Ms. Pepple and the motion was approved unanimously.

Mr. Barrier passed out a handout regarding broadband internet in Avery County. A copy of the document is attached. He spoke about the receipt of the North Carolina Wireless (NCW) grant approval, and thanked Ms. Pepple and the work of the Avery County Chamber of Commerce in helping to secure the grant. He stated that the project had lasted for approximately 18 to 19 months, and was finally completed. The grant money will be used to expand the availability of broadband internet access to more areas in Avery County. Mr. Barrier stated that the projected areas will include the Linville Falls area, Altamont and part of the Jonas Ridge area (Avery County portion of Jonas Ridge). Mr. Barrier noted that there is a tower on the Burke County side of Jonas Ridge. The hope is that tower can feed a tower on the Avery County side of Jonas Ridge as well.

Mr. Hazen asked how much it would take to make broadband internet access available to the remaining areas in Avery County that do not have the availability. Mr. Barrier noted that it would be at least \$25,000,000.00, possibly more based on the costs involved. Mr. Hazen asked why the grant which was recently received was for \$100,000.00. Ms. Pepple responded, and noted that it was the amount that was offered, and that a matching grant was offered to the county as well. Mr. Barrier noted that approximately sixteen years ago, the government offered funding for the installation, or expansion, of internet accessibility. He stated that Mitchell County took advantage of the funding, but that Avery County did not. He added that there are still some areas in Mitchell County that do not have internet availability.

Ms. Pepple added that Avery County was one recipient out of six applicants that applied for the grant. Mr. Hazen asked approximately how many people, or households, would have accessibility based on the expanded area to be covered. Ms. Pepple and Mr. Barrier responded and explained that it will depend on how many people sign up for the service. Ms. Lacey asked

if people must fill out an application for the service. Ms. Pepple stated that they did, and that people must do their part as far as securing the internet service. Mr. Barrier added that the county must market the service and help to make people aware that broadband internet is a service that will be available. He added that after looking at alternatives, the service that will be available, through LightLeap, was deemed the most affordable. Ms. Pepple added that the monthly prices range from \$52.00 per month, up to \$150.00 per month, depending on the services a purchaser may choose. She added, too, that there is a test available through LightLeap that one can do to determine potential signal strength in a selected area.

Mr. Hazen noted that the challenge appears to be getting the word out to potential customers. Mr. Barrier stated that it was a challenge and that he intends to use marketing means such as radio, newspaper, and working with Radio Shack to share information about the available service. Ms. Pepple noted that LightLeap is committed to providing good service to the Avery County area. She added that Skyline in Banner Elk, NC should hear soon about the status of a \$3,000,000.00 grant, which would be designated for fiber optic installation.

Mr. Barrier stated that there are updates to the Avery County website which show the locations of the currently available 5 commercial/industrial properties. Using the computer & screen set up in the boardroom, he shared with the group how to locate the page on the website, and showed an example of Avery and the surrounding counties. In the example, the group saw how available commercial properties are pinpointed, using green dots on the screen. Upon clicking on one of the dots, the data about the property will appear on the screen. He noted that there is also a list of available commercial properties on the site as well.

Mr. Barrier shared a copy of Our State magazine, October issue, showing a twenty page spread on Banner Elk, NC.

Mr. Barrier stated that regarding the U.S. Textiles property in Newland, that there should be an announcement regarding the property in August 2019. He stated that the IRC building in Newland is for sale again, and that the Cannon Memorial Hospital building in Banner Elk has been sold. This will be discussed in October at the meeting of the Banner Elk Town Board; a press release regarding the purchase should come out thereafter. Mr. Barrier stated that there is no news on the Lowes Foods property in Newland. He added, though, that he has told the real estate sales company handling the property, the new pool will be in close proximity. This might be a selling point.

Mr. Walter directed Ms. Lacey to confer with Frank Ruggerio regarding the advertisement which will go in the Avery County Chamber of Commerce publication. She agreed to do so and will work with Ms. Pepple on that as well.

Mr. Walter stated that we need to secure four more images (photos) for the video. Discussion followed regarding sources for obtaining four more photos for the video. The group agreed

that choice images would include photos of high school sports, the Woolly Worm festival, education and Grandfather Mountain. Ms. Gavenus stated that she has many photos. It was agreed that Ms. Lacey, Ms. Gavenus and Ms. Pepple will work on locating four photographs and will get them to Mr. Walter next week. Mr. Walter noted the importance of moving quickly on this project, as Mr. Amaya is waiting for the images before he can proceed with his work.

Mr. Barrier reminded the group of the upcoming Home and Harvest Festival in Newland. Mr. Walter suggested to Mr. Barrier that while he is there, he could look for artisans who may be interested in selling their products in a central location.

Regarding applications for membership on the Economic Development Committee, Ms. Gavenus stated that she has a membership application. Mr. Barrier will get a copy to Mike Reese. The Avery County Commissioners may review these applications for membership as well as conducting a review of applications received earlier.

Mr. Walter reviewed information he has received from Jeff Goss, a representative of a marketing firm in Asheville. Data regarding a program the agency is currently promoting was shared with EDC members via email. The advertising agency is offering production of video and an app regarding the heritage and offerings of various areas in the state. Ms. Lacey stated that the program, in her opinion, was too new, and she felt it might be a hard sell to the county commissioners. Ms. Pepple noted that the Goss agency does good work, but has high prices. Mr. Walter stated that given our limited budget, and the fact that we would like to see a track record for such a project, that we decline their offer at this time.

Ms. Siirila advised the group that she had introduced Mr. Walter to her colleague, Brent Ramsey, who is involved in video production. Mr. Walter and Mr. Ramsey met last week. Mr. Walter was able to review examples of Ramsey's work. Mr. Ramsey produces videos for individuals, businesses, etc. and is a certified FAA drone pilot. Mr. Walter suggested possibly using his services in the future for aerial photography/videography of available commercial properties in the area.

Mr. Walter and Mr. Barrier discussed reaching out to the Avery Journal newspaper and the Avery Post newspaper and pursue having them do feature articles about the projects and progress of the EDC. It was noted that any press must be positive. Mr. Hazen stated that he would help pursue this, but only with the approval of the county commissioners.

Mr. Walter reported on the Junior Achievement project. Ms. Siirila will assist with the implementation of the program. Our group will work with Teila Terrell, instructor, at Avery County High School. Materials have been ordered and should be received soon. The Junior Achievement program is slated to last seven weeks, and is scheduled to begin in mid-October. Mr. Walter, Ms. Siirila and volunteers with the NCWorks Career Center in Newland will assist

with the program. The classes may be offered on Tuesday or Thursday each week, and will run for 45 minutes within the 10:20 am to 11:45 am class time.

Mr. Walter advised the group that he would not be available to moderate the October meeting, and that Trey Oakley would not be available to do so either. Ms. Lacey will moderate the October meeting. Mr. Walter will prepare and provide her with the agenda.

Mr. Walter stated that he continues to work with Allen Cook (Mayland Community College) on the new business looking at Avery County as a place to locate. He stated that the project is moving forward.

Mr. Hazen stated that he has talked with Frances Magruder (representative of a start-up economic development group or foundation) in Linville, NC. He stated that her group appears to be slow to organize. He did invite her to attend the September 24, 2018 EDC meeting. She did not attend.

Mr. Walter inquired as to whether the October EDC meeting would be a joint meeting with the Avery County Commissioners. Mr. Barrier stated that it would not.

Mr. Hazen stated that during the last joint meeting, the county commissioners asked us about the goals of the EDC. He stated that he would be interested in hearing some of their goals as well. Mr. Walter reminded the group that the goals set forth at the last joint meeting were a focus on agriculture, supporting small business and retention of existing businesses.

Ms. Lacey shared that she had spoken with Debbie Gragg, Avery County Health Department. Ms. Gragg had advised her of a group of women in the community who were interested in community service, and interested in economic development. They generally meet on the last Wednesday of each month, and are affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. Mr. Barrier suggested that they may be a resource for volunteer staffing if we are able to move ahead with getting a central location for artisans and vendors to sell their products.

Mr. Walter reminded the group that Dr. King, new president of Lees-McRae College, will be the guest speaker at the October EDC meeting. He noted that Dr. King has expressed an interest in Lees-McRae doing outreach work. Mr. Hazen added that Dr. King has an individual interest in outreach work as well.

Ms. Lacey stated that Dr. Janet Taylor is interested in doing a play on Edgar Tufts and the impact that he had on the area. She has reached out to the hospital, churches, etc. to anyone who may be interested, and expects move ahead with the project with the plan to show the play next summer. Ms. Pepple suggested that a good person for her to talk to would be Dr. Janet Spear.

Mr. Barrier will host the Western Carolina Managers Meeting on October 12, 2018. County managers and town managers from western North Carolina (areas west of Wilkesboro) will come together at Linville Ridge for the event.

Mr. Walter stated that as far as the agriculture sub-committee goes, that he believes everything is in order, and that we are good to go with the tags for Christmas trees. He stated that he does not know if Mr. Pollard has made progress on labels for wine bottles at local wineries.

Mr. Walter thanked Ms. Siirila for agreeing to help with the Junior Achievement project in his absence.

Mr. Barrier stated that on the issue of recreation, he needed more time to reach out to the representative in Marion that he and Mr. Walter met with earlier.

The next meeting is scheduled for October 29, 2018.

A motion to adjourn was made at 6:05 pm by Ms. Pepple. A second was offered by Ms. Siirila and the motion was approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila



NEWS

Immediate Release

Date: September 21, 2018

Contact: Melynda Martin Pepple
Executive Director
Avery County Chamber of Commerce
4501 Tynecastle Highway, Unit 2
Banner Elk, NC 28604
(828) 898-5605

RE: Avery County Broadband
To: The Citizens of Avery County

It is our pleasure to announce the award of an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Grant to expand broadband in Avery County to North Carolina Wireless (NCW), LLC, a Fixed Wireless Internet Service Provider (WISP).

The grant request was submitted to the ARC by the Avery County Chamber of Commerce a 501 (c) (3) organization whose Executive Director is Ms. Melynda Pepple, on behalf of the citizens of Avery County.

Ms. Pepple was assisted by the Avery County Manager's Office and the staff of The High Country Council of Governments in developing the grant request to the ARC. The grant was approved in early 2018. *ARC's mission is to innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia.*

The grant is an award of \$100,000 for the purpose of expanding broadband service to unserved and underserved areas for Avery County. The grant was awarded with further consideration of serving low-density and low-income areas of the county. Ms. Pepple and the Avery Broadband Committee received early guidance from the NC Department of IT to assist in identifying the unserved and underserved areas.

After approval of the grant, a competitive process was utilized to select an Internet Service Provider to partner with the Chamber to implement the project. All methods of delivery of broadband services were considered (coax, fiber, and wireless etc).

It was determined that Fixed Wireless was the most cost-effective method and provided the most coverage for the unserved homes in Avery County. "The Broadband Committee determined that NCW with their branded 'LightLeap' service offered the most complete and comprehensive plan for delivering the project" stated Ms. Pepple.

NCW President Bill Shillito stated “We are proud and humbled to accept this award of funds; proud that the Avery Broadband Committee recognized the value that we bring to the project and humbled by the fact that the Broadband Committee identified us as offering the best and most effective approach to meet the grant’s aims. We will work hard to fulfill the aims of the grant. We are ably assisted by our local partner Mr. Doug Gragg, owner of Highland Electronics (Radio Shack), who serves as our sales and service team for Avery County. They are located at 520 Pineola St, Newland, NC 28657 and can be reached at (828) 733-5718. Mr. Gragg continues to go above and beyond his role in assisting NCW with identifying the best methods to deploy our unique capability in all parts of Avery County.”

In response to the project goals, documented demand, and existing tower sites, NCW identified several areas of early focus to expand service to. Those areas include the Jonas Ridge/Pineola and the Linville Falls/Altamont areas as best early focus areas. “Now that the grant is awarded, our staff can and will complete the timelines and progress goals toward accomplishing the aims of the grant” stated Mr. Josh Strickland, CTO for NCW. For more information on LightLeap offerings by NCW including pricing, go to www.lightleap.net. You may complete a service form request at the website to assist NCW in determining demand for expansion in Avery County.

Ms. Pepple stated “Many hours of work by a large number of players went into submitting the request to the ARC and selecting an ISP partner. I wish to thank the vision of the Avery County Commissioners and the Manager’s Office for their support toward this effort. I also wish to thank the Appalachian Regional Commission for seeing the need and providing the funding for this project. The High Country Council of Governments staff provided invaluable guidance and support through this entire process. We look forward to working with NCW to expand broadband in Avery County.”