

Avery County Economic Development Committee  
January 27, 2020  
Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on Monday, January 27, 2020 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:

Dave Smith, Phillip Barrier (County Manager), Ken Walter, Melynda Pepple, Clayton Harpold, Cindy Turbyfill (Clerk to the Board) and Eric Berg.

Absent were:

Susan Siirila, Kate Gavenus, David Pollard and Jesse Pope.

The meeting convened at 5:05 pm and was moderated by chairperson Ken Walter. A quorum was met.

(1) Approve and/or amend the November 25, 2019 meeting minutes:

A motion to approve the minutes of the November 25, 2019 meeting was made by Ms. Pepple. Mr. Harpold seconded and the motion was approved unanimously.

Mr. Walter noted that the group had met in December, but that a quorum had not been present. Ms. Siirila did take notes at that meeting. Mr. Barrier stated that said notes could not be considered minutes and could not be published as they are not official.

(2) Phillip Barrier Updates:

Mr. Barrier began by stating that he intended to leave the EDC meeting at 5:30 p.m. in order to attend the planning board meeting. He stated Light Leap has completed their grant, and that along with the ARC grant they are on track. There are 122 new clients with internet in Avery County today because of the grants. There are 382 households as of December 31, 2019 using Light Leap internet. Mr. Berg inquired about an additional tower being installed on Hawshaw Mountain for internet. Mr. Barrier advised that would not happen. Mr. Barrier stated that there has been a request for a permit for a new tower that is pending, but that it would be for telephone only.

Mr. Barrier reported that the county commissioners had approved the construction of a community room at the agricultural building. The room will seat 200 people, and it is expected that it will be used for banquets, performances, trade shows and other events. The room should be completed by September when the fair happens. Mr. Barrier stated that it will be a nice addition to the agricultural office and will help the local economy.

Mr. Barrier reported that the ad for the Avery County Chamber of Commerce publication is approved, paid for and ready for publication.

(3) Dave & Phillip: Newland strip mall property development status:

Mr. Smith stated that there has been another offer on the property, which is higher than the original offer. He stated, though, that there had been a counter offer. He stated that the issue was not as much about price, but instead it was more about time. He noted that a period of 180 days was set as due diligence time, and that both sides have approved this. Refundable money has to be put up for a period of 180 days. Once, the contract is signed, there will be much work to do. Mr. Barrier and Mr. Smith stated that they could not say who was looking to purchase or move into the property, but that the plan is positive and still moving forward. Both gentlemen expressed the need for discretion, and noted that the lack thereof may have impacted another deal that fell through earlier. Mr. Smith stated that the building has been sold to "x" who has indicated a desire to sell the property. So, now we are dealing with "x" instead of Faw, the previous owner. Mr. Barrier stated that he may be able to reveal the name of the interested party by the end of the week.

(4) Unfinished Business:

1. March 2020 Retaining Employees Workshop:

Mr. Walter stated that the speakers are lined up and confirmed. Discussion occurred regarding the approval of the draft version of the invitation letter submitted by Ms. Siirila. Mr. Barrier asked if we wished to have Administrative Assistant Dawn Carpenter serve as the point of contact. Mr. Walter stated that we did. Mr. Barrier set forth suggestions for changes to the invitation letter. Other matters discussed included a means for employers to RSVP, the number of people we can accommodate and when/how to collect the \$10.00 per person payment from those who choose to attend. It was determined that Ms. Siirila would provide a list of employers to Dawn Carpenter. Ms. Carpenter will thereafter prepare and send out invitation letters on Avery County letterhead. Mr. Walter advised the group that Old Hampton Store will be closed during the month of March, and that we would have to choose another food service provider to do catering. It was determined that Ms. Siirila would contact Lowery's BBQ and report on their availability. Little Deer Café was also noted as a possibility for catering. Ms. Pepple spoke of sending an invitation letter via email blast from the Chamber of Commerce list of clients. She indicated that this was a way to reach approximately 380 people. She noted 'the sooner the better' on getting the letters out and the group agreed. She noted that generally there is about a 10% response rate for such programs. The group also agreed that we may focus on a second workshop if the March workshop fills up and more individuals wish to see the similar programs.

(5) New Business:

Cindy Turbyfill reviewed information regarding the bylaws. She stated that the bylaws would have to be changed in order to change the time of year for election of officers. She pointed out that the election of officers would need to take place today (01/27/20) or that an agreement be reached to postpone the election of officers.

A review of expiring terms was discussed. Terms that are up in May 2020: Clayton Harpold, Dave Smith, Ken Walter and David Pollard (4 positions). Some of these members are finishing out terms vacated by previous team members. Ms. Turbyfill stated that in May, those who wish to submit applications for continuing participation on the EDC may do so. Thereafter, the Avery County Commissioners would approve and vote on members the following month.

Mr. Walter advised that he had a conversation with the mother of Jessica Wiseman, of Linville Falls Winery. He stated that Ms. Wiseman would not be available to serve on the EDC.

Following additional discussion, Ms. Turbyfill stated that since a quorum was present, that officers could be elected. She noted that in May, members can be re-appointed if for some reason members chose to leave or were not approved for continued participation.

**Election of Officers:**

- A. Ms. Pepple nominated Ken Walter for chairperson. Mr. Smith seconded. Mr. Walter was elected to the position of chairperson unanimously.
- B. Ms. Pepple nominated Clayton Harpold for the position of vice-chairperson. Mr. Smith seconded. Mr. Harpold was elected to the position of vice-chairperson unanimously.
- C. Ms. Pepple nominated Susan Siirila for the position of secretary. Mr. Harpold seconded. Ms. Siirila was elected secretary unanimously.

(6) Education sub-committee report:  
No report.

(7) Outdoor recreation sub-committee report:

Mr. Berg began by noting that what differentiates Avery County from other areas in terms of recreation is that it is colder here. He stated that there are basically two areas of interest: (1) recreation for people who live here year-round and (2) recreation for tourists. He stated that we need to look at what the support organizations are (new pool, YMCA) as well as looking at employment or what keeps people in this area. He indicated that we need to work on looking at how these things are related, as well as looking at the infrastructure that is needed to support recreational activities.

The relation of infrastructure to recreation was discussed, specifically roads to accommodate events with large numbers of tourists, such as Highland Games, plus roads to accommodate bicycling and related recreational activities. Issues with infrastructure come down to money. In looking at other areas, sales tax revenue is used to support infrastructure. Proceeds come back to the whole county, not just the recreation providers. The need to re-examine an occupancy tax was brought up. Ms. Turbyfill spoke to the issue of an occupancy tax in Avery County. She noted that the power of the vote goes to municipalities. The municipalities would have to lessen their take in proportion to what the county would receive from an occupancy tax. There are not many hotels outside municipalities in Avery County. She concluded by stating that historically, there were individuals in the area who were opposed to an occupancy tax.

Mr. Walter suggested that we seek out someone knowledgeable on the subject of occupancy tax and have them as a guest speaker at an EDC meeting. It was noted that with the emergence of VRBO and Air B&B rentals, the matter takes on new meaning. Additionally, change would require statutory change, which can be difficult and time consuming.

Mr. Berg gave examples of Charleston County in South Carolina and rebates that county offered to residents. Discussion occurred regarding property tax for full time residents versus part time residents. Included in the discussion were the issues of Tier 1 versus Tier 2 county designation, communication with the public regarding the benefits of tax type or rate increases and the impact that additional tax may have on lower income families.

The time of the next meeting will be February 24, 2020.

Mr. Harpold made a motion to adjourn. It was seconded by Melynda Pepple and approved unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 6:20.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila

