

Avery County Economic Development Committee

August 26, 2019

Minutes

The Avery County Economic Development Committee (EDC) met at 5:00 pm on August 26, 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:

Phillip Barrier (County Manager), Ken Walter, Dave Smith, Clayton Harpold, Kate Gavenus, Dennis Aldridge (County Commissioner), Tim Phillips (County Commissioner) and Melynda Pepple.

Absent and excused from the meeting were:

Jesse Pope, David Pollard and Susan Siirila

The meeting was moderated by chairperson Ken Walter.

Agenda item one:

Dawn Carpenter, Administrative Assistant, recorded and prepared handwritten notes for preparation of minutes in the absence of Susan Siirila.

Agenda item two:

A motion to approve the minutes of the July 2019 minutes was made by Clayton Harpold. A second was offered by Eric Berg and the motion was approved unanimously.

Agenda item three:

County Manager's Report – Phillip Barrier

(1) Mr. Barrier has touched base with David Pollard's father. Ken Walter has communicated with Mr. Pollard by telephone. Mr. Pollard reported that at the end of July 2019, he had done as much business as he did in the entire year 2018. Mr. Pollard stated that he had been very busy, and that if he was unable to attend the August 26, 2019 EDC meeting, that he would definitely attend the next meeting. Mr. Walter stated that Mr. Pollard was adamant that he wished to remain on the EDC board, and that we need to keep him as a member as he brings knowledge from the agricultural community.

(2) Mr. Barrier reported that he had recently returned from a commissioner's conference on Saturday, August 24, 2019. He recommended that EDC members visit [www.ncacc.org](http://www.ncacc.org) and review the 2019 map book. He shared highlights of data on the map as follows:

A. Avery County has one of the highest high school graduation rates in the state.

B. Expenses for students is acceptable. Our education system is well taken care of. Watauga County does outspend Avery County per student.

C. Teacher supplement pay is higher in Avery County than that of some neighboring counties. The number of classroom teachers is included in the capital fund distribution. Charter schools are not listed (Avery County's Charter school is Crossnore Academy).

D. Children living in poverty-we are a little higher than Mitchell, Watauga and Yancey counties.

E. Unemployment figures are similar from both Avery and Watauga counties. Mitchell County has a higher unemployment rate, as they are still suffering from plant closures.

F. Food insecurity rates are higher in Avery County than in some neighboring counties. This is surprising because of the services provided by Feeding Avery Families, RAM and Volunteer Avery. Mr. Barrier noted that he is not sure all the numbers are being reported.

G. The number of insured persons in Avery County is high. Mr. Barrier stated that he is not sure where that number is coming from, and that he intends to check on it when he has time.

H. Avery County is well taken care of in terms of mental health providers.

I. The number of opioid deaths in Avery County are similar to the numbers for Mitchell, Watauga and Yancey counties.

J. Avery County had less Medicaid eligible persons than did neighboring counties. Numbers showing that we had less Medicaid eligible persons than did Ashe County, compared to the number of insured individuals, is surprising.

Mr. Berg commented that this has to do with Medicare expansion. Mr. Barrier noted that it might be.

K. Children under DSS responsibility in Avery County is lower than numbers in neighboring counties. Mr. Barrier noted that this is surprising as we have a need for more foster care.

L. Regarding the number of disconnected youth, Mr. Barrier stated that he did not know how the data was collected.

M. The number of violent crimes in Avery County is low.

N. On property tax rates, Avery County is in line with our neighboring counties. Ashe County does have a ¼ cent extra sales tax that gives them approximately \$70,000.00 per year. Avery County can pursue a similar tax in 2020. The county can appropriate what the money would be used for before it goes to a vote. There cannot be advertisement of what the money would be used for.

Eric Berg commented that a third party can advertise, but that the county cannot. Mr. Barrier agreed that was correct.

Mr. Walter stated that people are only seeing 'more sales tax' and that if they knew what it was going to be used for, the outcome may be better.

Mr. Barrier stated that, on paper, Avery County is the 8<sup>th</sup> wealthiest county in the state. This is because of the gated communities.

Mr. Berg relayed that his former place of residence, Charleston, South Carolina, has a 2 tier property tax plan. Residents and non-residents were taxed differently. He added that Avery County is missing out by not taking advantage of a similar plan. Mr. Harpold added that at a property that he owns in Texas, a similar method of taxing residents vs. non-residents is in place.

O. Internet subscription rates (the number of people subscribing to internet services) in Avery County. Mr. Barrier stated that he disagreed with the numbers set forth on the map book, because if you have a telephone through which you get internet, you are counted as having internet access. He stated that this is not a true representation of the number of internet subscribers in Avery County. Previously, the numbers came from census numbers.

Mr. Barrier reported that the breakout groups at the conference were good. One entitled Reconnect Rural and urban: A Regional Approach to Economic Development set forth economic opportunities and ideas to connect counties. The idea involves tearing down walls and working together to make North Carolina better. Mr. Barrier stated that he would work with Mr. Walter as far as planning attendance at the Re-energizing North Carolina summit in October. The program will be about building outdoor communities, and it will be held in Asheville.

Mr. Barrier reminded the group that the fair starts next week, and that government will be represented there. Internet will be available for visitors to the tables. Many towns in the county will join as well.

Mr. Barrier advised the group that a ribbon cutting ceremony will be held at Grandfather Mountain on Labor Day, with a groundbreaking ceremony at 4:30 p.m.

Regarding broadband internet, Mr. Barrier stated that there had been a push to allow government to become part of the infrastructure. Companies such as AT&T and Spectrum are opposed to this. The response from local government has been "you take federal monies, why not allow counties to step up, instead of you taking the money and then paying them back?"

Mr. Harpold reiterated that if one has a telephone that has internet capabilities, they are shown as having internet on the map. Mr. Aldridge responded by saying that he felt the map they had was not accurate. He stated that one possible response is that in a census block, if one has internet, it shows that the whole block has internet. Mr. Barrier added that the numbers are not correct. Mr. Walter added that if one has high speed internet, it would be better not to click on it so it would not be counted. Mr. Aldridge concluded by stating that it would be better

to collect numbers of those having internet access by going door-to-door instead of block-to-block.

Mr. Barrier stated that a house sale had been lost due to lack on internet availability in a housing development. He noted that the developer was willing to lay the infrastructure in the development, but that still was not enough to create internet availability for homes in the development. Mr. Harpold likened it to gas providers, who will lay in pipelines only so far, then expect homeowners to pay for gas lines to their homes.

Mr. Barrier stated that he was excited to report that the Town of Newland has seven lot developments underway with seven new homes coming in. This is the first new development in five years.

Agenda item four:

Mr. Walter reminded the group of Christy Hemenway, Run Amuck Meadery. He advised that the EDC has helped connect her with a person who is a certified mead judge and that he will be a good resource. Hemenway has looked at the building in Newland where Sup'herb' Gutters was located.

Mr. Smith stated that the old Lowes Foods building is on the auction agenda with Iron Horse Auctions. They are sending papers for us to complete. He noted that the developers we have been working with are still interested, but only if there is an anchor tenant. He added that the developer has said they do want to be registered for the auction. Mr. Smith will get the paperwork from Iron Horse. The bank is in control and they want their money by the end of the year. Mr. Smith stated that the property will not go for much, as there are issues with the parking lot. He stated that he cannot see a half-million dollar offer on the property. He did note that Food Lion is interested in the property.

Mr. Barrier stated that there was an opportunity for low income housing to be built in Avery County, but that we were passed up. It will be next August before we can apply for the program again.

Mr. Berg asked about Lidl grocers. Mr. Smith advised that an information packet has been sent to them, as has Food Lion. He noted that Food Lion and Aldi are the only ones we have heard back from. Aldi will go into a community if it is a German community. Mr. Phillips asked if Trader Joes and Aldi are the same company. Mr. Barrier replied, and noted that they are under the same umbrella, same company with different identities for their stores. Mr. Smith stated that we need to 'wait this out' because the property will go to auction.

Mr. Barrier stated that the Avery Family Impact store has moved from the building by Braswell Well Drilling to the old Avery Heating and Air building.

Agenda item five:

Mr. Walter began the discussion regarding the upcoming workshop scheduled for March 2020. He stated that we can use the Avery County Library meeting room. He has contacted Debbie at the library about this. He asked what we wanted to call the meeting. Ms. Gavenus stated that the word 'summit' suggests a broad coverage of data, while the word 'workshop' suggested getting to the nitty-gritty of a matter. Mr. Walter suggested calling out planned meeting a workshop.

Mr. Barrier stated that at the above-referenced conference that he recently attended, that he was disappointed with the lack of information in some of the breakout groups. He advised that we need to be careful with planning, and asked who we could bring in that would be dynamic. He noted that many businesses are struggling with employee retention, and that there are no good models out there to address the issue. He stated that one county is using the community college system for staff training. Ms. Gavenus added that often employees need training on soft skills. Discussion followed regarding the disconnect between employers and employees on issues involving both hard skills and soft skills in the workplace. Mr. Walter shared personal knowledge of a friend in New York who employs young people, students, who are unreliable, difficult employees, and the lack of remedies available to correct the problems.

Ms. Gavenus stated that she felt we could get some good people for the workshop. She shared data about good things that Eseeola Lodge is doing as far as keeping employees. She stated that we may want to focus on getting real businesses who are doing good things locally for speakers at the workshop.

Mr. Aldridge stated that he was underwhelmed by the information passed along at the recent workshop referenced by Mr. Barrier. He noted that many of the people who are supposed to have the answers do not have the answers at all, and that we need to be selective with who we choose as speakers.

Mr. Harpold suggested Sam Stevenson and Jim Swinkola as speakers.

Mr. Walter asked if Pat Mitchell (NC Department of Commerce) might be available. Ms. Gavenus stated that she would lend some weight to the discussion, and that she would be a good keynote speaker. Ms. Gavenus will recruit her and stated that she felt like Mitchell would come. She added that we need to be able to give Mitchell a date.

Mr. Walter indicated that he had spoken with Ms. Siirila and that they felt like evening would be a good time for the workshop. Ms. Gavenus countered with stating that she felt that most people preferred a lunch and learn setting. Mr. Harpold agreed and stated that he believed more people would be inclined to go to something during lunch time. Mr. Walter agreed that a

lunch and learn format sounded good, and that having the workshop in March may reduce the possibility of bad weather impacting the date and time of the workshop. Mr. Harpold added that he felt that Thursday is typically a good day of the week to have such a program. The dates of March 19 and March 26 were suggested as dates for the workshop. Mr. Walter will recontact Debbie at the Avery County Morrison Library about the venue. Ms. Gavenus will contact Pat Mitchell, NCDOC, regarding serving as the keynote speaker. Mr. Barrier stated that he may pursue getting Bill Slagle, who is a state representative for Workforce Development as a speaker. Mr. Walter asked if he was applicable for this workshop. Mr. Aldridge stated that he felt Slagle was not the best for this workshop. Mr. Barrier stated that there were other local people who may be better, and that we should set a goal of keeping it to one hour.

Discussion followed regarding possible speakers. The following individuals were selected as possible speakers for the workshop:

Jesse Pope, Grandfather Mountain Stewardship; Josh Smith, Elk River Resort; David Pollard, Avery County tree grower; Pat Mitchell, Keynote; and John Blackburn, Eseeola Lodge.

Ms. Pepple and Ms. Gavenus have structured similar programs in the past. They suggested that an acceptable format would be to have people eat while the keynote speaker speaks. It was also suggested that the presentation be as a panel, not each person giving an individual speech. Discussion followed regarding 4 or 5 people that may be asked to participate. Mr. Barrier will recruit Dave McManus. Melynda Pepple will recruit Fallon Boland.

Mr. Walter advised the group that Ms. Siirila's spouse is the kitchen manager at The Old Hampton Store, and asked if we wanted to consider having OHS cater the event for us. Mr. Walter will speak to Ms. Siirila about menu and pricing.

Mr. Walter asked the group what kind of number we should consider in the way of participants. Ms. Gavenus suggested 30-40 people, noting food prices.

Ms. Gavenus noted that it would be nice if we could do a quarterly program, such as the one discussed at today's meeting. Mr. Harpold stated that we need to start advertising the event in January and note that registration is limited. Mr. Walter and Ms. Gavenus agreed that online registration for the event would be good. Additionally, Mr. Walter suggested at least two weeks of newspaper advertising.

Ms. Gavenus left the meeting. This resulted in lack of a quorum. That being the case, Melynda Pepple made a motion to adjourn. A second was offered by Mr. Smith and approved unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 6:10 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila