

Avery County Economic Development Committee
November 25, 2019
Minutes

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

Jesse Pope, Dave Smith, Kate Gavenus, Tim Phillips (Avery County Commissioner), Phillip Barrier (County Manager), Susan Siirila, Ken Walter, Melynda Pepple, Clayton Harpold, Eric Berg, Randy Fedro (Visitor) and Margaret Early-Thiele (Guest Speaker).

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

(1) Approve and/or amend the 10/28/19 meeting minutes:

Ms. Gavenus made a motion for approval of the October 28, 2019 minutes. Mr. Pope seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

(2) Guest Speaker Margaret Early-Thiele, MCC Foundation Director

Mr. Walter introduced guest speaker Margaret Early-Thiele, guest speaker, to the group. Ms. Early-Thiele is the director of the Mayland Community College Foundation. Following introductions, Ms. Early-Thiele gave an overview of what Mayland Community College is doing in the way of increasing enrollment. Mayland Community College is ranked tenth (10th) in national ratings for community colleges. They currently are working with a three-pronged approach to education and enterprise. Mayland Community College currently operates the Mayland Enterprise Corporation, which is a 501 C-3 non-profit agency. They are involved in such projects as the observatory in Yancey County, and the continuing education classrooms at the historic Banner Elk school. Ms. Early-Thiele explained that the MCC foundation entity raises money, and the MCC enterprise entity earns money.

Ms. Early-Thiele reported on Mayland Community College's current project, which is the refurbishing of the Pinebridge Center in Spruce Pine. Mayland Community College acquired the Pinebridge Center building approximately five years ago. Once completed, the refurbished building will be called the Three Peaks Enrichment Center. The three peaks refer to Grandfather Mountain, Roan Mountain and Mount Mitchell, recognizing the geographic location of the building. Mayland Community College will relocate their cosmetology and EMT training classes to the building, with the possibility of other classes being taught there as well. The Mayland Community College Small Business Center will also be relocated to the building. Additionally, the building will house a restaurant, bar, state-of-the-art auditorium, commercial kitchen and an offsite full-service boutique hotel.

Ms. Early-Thiele reported that the estimated completion date for the building is fall of 2020. She noted that according to a report completed by the High Country Council of Governments, the center will create a \$15,000,000.00 economic boost for the counties of Avery, Mitchell and

Yancey. She stated that there are no figures yet to tell how many new jobs the center may bring to the area.

Ms. Early-Thiele stated that another new project that Mayland Community College has underway is the construction of a planetarium, near their current Bare Dark Sky Observatory in Yancey county. The planetarium will be completed in 2020. She shared information about the Mayland Community College website, and how one can go about learning more about their current projects. She encouraged EDC members in attendance to 'spread the word' about the good things happening at Mayland Community College and to reach out to them for more information about their projects or programs at any time.

Ms. Early-Thiele's presentation ended at 5:41 p.m.

(3) Phillip Barrier Updates

Mr. Barrier reported that he, Dennis Aldridge, Wood Hall "Woody" Young and Mr. Walter had recently attended a meet & greet with Representative Tim Moore. He stated that they were allowed ten minutes to present information regarding Avery County. He added that he utilized a report that Tommy Burluson (Avery County Inspections) had completed earlier. The topics that Mr. Barrier focused on during the presentation to Rep. Moore included the county's need for high speed internet, housing and health insurance. They also discussed that fact that Avery County is a tier 2 county, and therefore at a disadvantage when it comes to additional state assistance. Mr. Walter stated that he feels that Rep. Moore and others understand that there is a problem with the tier system in North Carolina. Mr. Phillips added that when he has inquired about the tiers and what distinguishes counties, that no one has been able to provide good answers. Mr. Barrier stated that the state should not tie the criteria to qualify for grants to the tier of a county.

Mr. Barrier noted that he had spoken to representative of Skyline/Skybest earlier in the day and learned that the USDA grant will not be available to us this year. Mr. Berg inquired about licensure for Charter and similar businesses. Mr. Pope responded and provided information regarding AT&T and their territoriality. Simply, Charter or Skyline would have to pay AT&T if they provided services in an AT&T area or used their poles. Mr. Harpold stated that AT&T controls the lower portion of the county, and that AT&T is moving away from landlines and focusing on fiber optics.

(4) Dave & Phillip: Newland strip mall property status

Mr. Smith reported that the deal with a retailer to purchase the Lowes Foods building had fallen through. He stated that bids are being accepted again through December 2, 2019. Mr. Barrier reiterated that the property was going back to auction, and he stated that a retail grocery chain is still interested in the property.

Mr. Smith indicated that the investment group in Florida that he has been working with is still interested in the property. He stated that he has been given conflicting information regarding a required closing on the property by the end of the year. Mr. Smith will continue to pursue the project.

(5) Unfinished Business

A. March 2020 Workshop

Ms. Pepple has confirmed Fallon Boland of Grandfather Golf and Country Club as a speaker for the March 2020 Retaining Employees workshop.

Mr. Harpold stated that he has not communicated with Josh Smith or Dave Phillips; neither of those gentlemen are confirmed speakers.

Mr. Walter stated that there will be no charge for lunch for attendees.

B. Videos

Mr. Barrier stated that we must still secure approval from the county attorney before releasing the video of the Avery County Cooperative Extension Office/Avery County Fair. He will contact the attorney and find out the reason for the delay.

C. Kate Gavenus/Main Street America

Ms. Gavenus stated that she had been in contact with the Town of Newland regarding the Main Street America project, but that there is no progress on it at this time.

(6) New Business

Ms. Gavenus stated that she has spoken with Jessica Wiseman, Linville Falls Winery. Ms. Wiseman has expressed interest in serving on the EDC, but still needs to look at time constraints before making a commitment. Ms. Gavenus stated that there are other people in the agricultural field who may be worth considering.

Mr. Walter asked about David Pollard, and whether we knew if he wished to continue serving on the EDC. Mr. Pope replied and indicated that Mr. Pollard was ready to step down from serving on the EDC. Mr. Pollard will be invited to the next meeting, however. Mr. Pope suggested Reed Clark as a possible replacement for Mr. Pollard, as he works in the Christmas tree/agricultural area. Mr. Barrier will talk to Mr. Clark after the holidays and see if he may be interested in serving on the EDC.

Mr. Harpold left the meeting at 6:00 p.m.

Ms. Gavenus stated that a representative of the Brian Hamilton Foundation will visit Avery County High School and Avery Middle School on December 11, 2019. The representative will speak at a luncheon at the cafeteria at Avery County High School. Ms. Gavenus stated that the goal is to have community leaders in attendance.

Ms. Gavenus left the meeting at 6:09 p.m.

(7) Education sub-committee report

Ms. Siirila, Mr. Walter and Mr. Smith recently completed a Junior Achievement program at Avery County High School. Mr. Smith stated that he did not feel it was as successful as previous J.A. programs that the EDC has participated in. He stated that it was primarily due to the age of

the students; the students in the most recent group were younger than in previous classes. Mr. Walter stated that before the next J.A. program, the instructor, Teila Terrell, will help facilitate inclusion of the J.A. program in a class made up primarily of high school juniors and seniors. Additionally, she will advise of the age of students before the next program begins. Ms. Siirila stated that while this J.A. program may not have been as successful as previous programs, that it was still worthwhile and that she felt like the students benefitted.

Mr. Pope suggested that Ellis Ayers be invited to serve as a speaker at an EDC meeting. Mr. Ayers is a career technical education instructor and is involved in vocational classes and internships for students.

Mr. Barrier stated that transportation in Avery County after 4:30 p.m. continues to be an issue, and that students participating in internships may have trouble finding available transportation.

Mr. Phillips left the meeting at 6:12 p.m.

(8) Outdoor Recreation sub-committee report

Mr. Berg stated that he had recently sold his home in South Carolina and had been in the process of relocating, so he had not had much time to spend in researching material about recreational activities available in Avery County. He stated that it is his intent to take an inventory of recreational businesses in Avery County.

Mr. Walter advised the group that he has sent a copy of the power point presentation, used by Mr. Barrier in the presentation to Representative Moore, via email.

Additionally, he stated that Ms. Siirila had generated a two-page list of Avery County employers that we may invite to the March 2020 workshop.

Mr. Barrier stated that the Mountain Coaster, a new attraction in Banner Elk, may be delayed in opening.

Mr. Pope stated that Avery County gets funding from the AMY Foundation totaling approximately \$5 - \$8 million dollars per year. He stated that funding also comes from the Dogwood Foundation.

Mr. Barrier stated that a continued focus needs to be on the region, not just individual counties, and that counties need to continue to work together on economic development. He concluded by stating that we need someone from the town boards at EDC meetings.

Mr. Smith made a motion to adjourn; Mr. Pope seconded and the motion was approved unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 6:32 p.m.

The next meeting is scheduled for December 30, 2019.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan P. Siirila