

Special Called Board of Supervisors Meeting (Thursday, January 18, 2024)
Northumberland County, Virginia

Members present

James M. Long, Richard F. Haynie, James W. Brann, Chip Williams, AC Fisher, Jr.

Other Staff Present:

Mr. Luttrell Tadlock, County Administrator

Mr. Drew Basye, Assistant County Administrator

Ms. Morgan Wilson, Executive Assistant

Mr. Robert Headley, IT Administrator

Mr. Carl Hayden, IT Technician

1. Opening of Meeting 5:30 P.M.

Information: A. Call to Order

The special called meeting was convened by Chairman Haynie and held at the Northumberland Courthouse located at 220 Judicial Place, Heathsville, VA 22473.

The Planning Commission meeting was called to order by Mr. Garfield Parker and he noted that they have a quorum.

The Economic Development Commission meeting was called to order by Dr. Karen Pica and she noted that they have a quorum.

Information: B. Introductions

Each board member introduced themselves as follows:

Lynn Stuart, EDC District II

Melissa Bunns-Carter, EDC District III

Dr. Karen Pica, EDC District IV

Mr. Maurice Johnson, EDC District V

Mr. John Kost, Planning Commission District II

Ms. Heidi Wilkins-Corey, Planning Commission District V

Ms. Vivian Diggs, Planning Commission District III

Mr. Charles Williams, III, Planning Commission District V

Mr. Garfield Parker, Planning Commission District III

Mr. Patrick O'Brien, Planning Commission District II

Mr. Chip Williams, Board of Supervisors District V

Mr. Alfred C. Fisher, Board of Supervisors District IV

Mr. Richard F. Haynie, Board of Supervisors District II

Mr. James W. Brann, Board of Supervisors District I

Mr. James M. Long, Board of Supervisors District III

Information: C. Economic Development Commission Objectives

Dr. Karen Pica, Chairman of the EDC, explained that the Economic Development Commission (EDC) is in the process of updating the strategic plan for the County. The EDC has looked at the comprehensive plan from the Planning Commission and at the Northern Neck Economic Development plan. Dr. Pica stated that the Board of Supervisors have requested the EDC work on increasing employers, employees, and tourists, so the goal for this meeting is to get a sense from the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors where they see the County in 2030 so the EDC can make appropriate considerations, partnerships and action items for each year to achieve that 2030 vision. Dr. Pica asked if there are any incentives the County is willing to offer or can the County give any suggestions for things they need to stay away from. She asked if there are any priorities that are not in those existing documents that the EDC needs to consider. The EDC is currently in the process of developing partnerships with the County's school system so that there's a liaison to talk about career progression and enhancement starting at young ages. Dr. Pica stated that the EDC has attempted vigorously to engage with the Chamber of Commerce so they're working to develop a path and alternatives there. She thanked Mr. Basye and Mr. Bullard as they have a close relationship with Lisa Hull in the Northern Neck Planning Commission. In summary, the EDC's primary objective is to learn from the Board and the Planning Commission where they're supposed to be going and what they need to stay away from.

2. Strategic Planning Priorities/Goals for Economic Development

Information: A. Board of Supervisors

Vice Chairman Brann asked that the EDC consider Watermen and Farmers as business owners as well because those are some of the County's major sources of employment. He then mentioned something he heard regarding the Chamber of Commerce grouping small businesses together in order to provide health insurance to their employees at the same rate as larger companies.

Dr. Pica stated it wasn't the County's Chamber of Commerce, but she'd definitely look into it.

Supervisor Fisher stated that Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) has put together a program to bring younger adults into the oystering industry which is a closed industry. He informed the Boards that there are already students involved in this program and out there making money, so he'd like them to look further into the program and maybe get some more people involved.

Dr. Pica asked if there would be any concern for an incentive program to help pay for licenses for students who go through workforce development programs, but obtaining the license is a roadblock. She asked if this incentive is something they'd like the EDC to explore or stay away from.

Vice Chairman Brann stated the adults also need to be considered and not only the younger generation in terms of workforce development. Mr. Brann would like to see what Social Services is doing to help encourage those to work. Are they providing literature and resources to

those who are able to work instead of allowing them to rely on the benefits of Social Services? Vice Chairman Brann used the town of Warsaw as an example of workforce development. He believes the County should reach out to them to see what incentives were offered to the business owners to come into Warsaw and to see what resources were used to grow that town.

Supervisor Long asked what businesses the EDC had in mind to explore.

Dr. Pica stated they don't have a list right now as they are trying to explore where the priorities should be and then they will create a list based on previous studies/data they have researched.

Mr. Kost, member of the Planning Commission, informed Supervisor Long that workforce development works best in rural areas when you start with the great assets it already has. Examples listed were forestry, aquaculture, and agriculture. Then, the aspects that add value to those assets are considered. Mr. Kost stated that there are lots of industries that the County simply is just not well suited for because of location, power availability, and telecommunications.

Mr. Kost asked Supervisor Fisher if there is a trade association of oystermen where they get together to make industry decisions.

Supervisor Fisher stated that the only association they have is the General Watermen's Association, but the oystermen don't have any sort of association as he's referring to.

Mr. Kost explained the purpose of his question is to identify a way to ask the oyster industry what they need from the County. He stated that the oyster industry is large in the County so finding ways to make the industry more successful is something the County should invest in.

Vice Chairman Brann believes that there are a lot of Watermen in the County that would love to have that conversation.

Dr. Pica informed the Boards that every EDC meeting is going to start with a discovery session and at their last meeting they had a discovery session for a franchise based on Mr. Long's questions about fast food restaurants. At each meeting, the EDC would like to invite businesses in for a discovery session and ask questions such as: what's getting in your way and stopping you from expanding? What can be done to help you be successful? What are some of the biggest challenges you have when looking at something new? Dr. Pica further explained that the EDC wants to use these discovery sessions to find out what the challenges are for businesses, what incentives interest them, and to become more educated about the things they don't know.

Vice Chairman Brann suggested the EDC talk to the successful businesses in the County as well to see what made them successful.

Supervisor Long stated that the County needs to work fast because there are people who want to put a stop to the menhaden fishing industry and that would cause a lot of people to lose their jobs.

Chairman Haynie stated that Omega is one of the County's largest employers. Supervisor Chip Williams informed the Boards that Omega protein has been a friend to the County over the past few days during the sewage spill. They provided one of their vessels, their employees, fuel, and time, so this goes beyond them just being a large employer.

Mr. O'Brien, member of the Planning Commission, asked if the school had started their STEM program in the new building and asked how many students were enrolled.

Vice Chairman Brann stated that the school provides the Board with those numbers, but they can't recall them at this time. However, the program is underway, and the building is complete. He continued by stating that the school got their FFA program back up and running this year as well.

Mr. O'Brien acknowledged that the Food Lion in the County charges more than the Food Lion in Kilmarnock. He stated part of this is due to the population density and competition of Walmart, but he believes that it's in the County's best interest to make an effort to get another supermarket chain to allow for more job opportunities and lower prices.

Mrs. Bunns-Carter, member of the EDC, stated that the County has Dollar General as an alternative and she doesn't foresee the County getting another Food Lion. She explained that the prices are different in Kilmarnock because they have Tri-Star, Walmart, and Food Lion.

Dr. Pica explained that the EDC has no idea whether or not another grocery store wants to come into the County, but they'd be happy to explore the idea. From the Planning Commission's perspective, she asked if there are any incentives or regulatory relief that they'd be willing to offer to attract another store.

Mr. O'Brien stated that the Planning Commission has no authority to grant any fiscal incentives.

Vice Chairman Brann stated that he wished Mr. Corder were here to answer some of these questions because he tried bringing another grocery store into the County but hit a lot of roadblocks and a lot of it was due to the County's population density.

Supervisor Long stated that Lancaster County's population is only 9,000 and Northumberland's is 15,000. Mr. Long believes there is nothing the County can't do if we get the information needed and go after it.

Mr. Johnson, member of the EDC, stated that one of the problems with bringing in a franchise is the condition of the existing environment such as accessibility of sewer, water, and other utilities.

Mr. O'Brien stated that there is a sewer system in Callao and in Reedville, but he doesn't know of any population center in between the two that would be large enough to support their own system today.

Dr. Pica provided a little recap of the discussion thus far. The priorities are workforce development, attracting new businesses, and working with other counties to see what they've prioritized. Dr. Pica emphasized that she doesn't want to get too far into the solutions because they have lots of work to do but this meeting has provided great feedback.

Supervisor Fisher suggested that the first priority as far as where to place the businesses is considering where the water and sewer are because that's their only feasible location.

Supervisor Williams referred to Mr. Johnson's suggestion of the County providing services to the businesses and asked if the County should provide those before having commitments or after the businesses have committed.

Mr. Johnson stated that it'd be beneficial to make incremental decisions between now and the next 5-10 years so that the County has more opportunities down the road. Providing services before commitment is helpful if economically feasible, but some services can't be provided before commitment such as a sewer system in the middle of no infrastructure.

Mrs. Heidi Wilkins-Corey asked if the County had "bankers" on board that are willing to help with community development. She recommended inviting some of the local banks to discovery sessions to find out what their commitment is to the community.

Supervisor Long asked Mr. Williams, member of the Planning Commission, about discussion that occurred several years ago on getting a Walmart in the County,

Mr. Williams stated that it was talked about, but they never got anywhere with the idea.

Supervisor Fisher stated that there was a group of businessmen who led a coalition in Northumberland and Lancaster in efforts to keep Walmart out. As everyone knows they didn't succeed because there's a Walmart in Kilmarnock, however there were thousands of dollars put into this coalition because they didn't want their hometown businesses to be affected.

Vice Chairman Brann asked what the County has to offer that will attract people to come here. He stated that there are a lot of small businesses relying on people who own second homes or are tourists on vacation who often spend their money in their stores while visiting. On a different topic, Mr. Brann stated that there's a restaurant that hasn't re-opened since Covid because they probably don't have the finances to do so. He believes that a lot of citizens would love it if they opened back up again. He suggested someone consider approaching them to see what the County can do to help them get back up and running.

Mr. Williams stated that one of the things he hears most about our area is that it is so attractive because we don't have all the traffic, noise, and crime.

Vice Chairman Brann agreed and stated we don't need to flood the County with unnecessary stuff but there are things to do in order to make it better.

Mr. Williams stated that the villages of the County would be a good place to start in terms of where to place any new businesses and it seems as though water and sewer are important for these large businesses, so if the County is serious about attracting them, we're going to have to provide those services. Mr. Williams believes the Board will have to decide target locations for these businesses at some point.

Vice Chairman Brann asked if Mr. Williams was referring to a light to medium industrial park with water and sewer all in one location.

Mr. Williams stated that the problem with an industrial park is that there's not enough labor around here to support it. He said that there's a lot of businesses that are operating shorthanded and some days close until those employees decide to come back.

Mr. Johnson believes that this topic should be discussed with the school system.

Vice Chairman Brann stated that's why he'd like to include Social Services in this discussion because maybe the free services won't be offered as frequently knowing that there are jobs available. He explained that he's not trying to take any services away because he's aware that there are people with health concerns that prevent them from working, however there are others as healthy as himself that don't work.

Dr. Pica explained that she understands a priority is workforce, however Mr. Johnson mentioned there's a need to focus on the school system because there are students graduating that don't know how to construct a sentence, how to show up to work on time, or do basic math. She stated that the proficiency rate for the school system is below 50% in English and Math. Dr. Pica informed the Boards that they are going to ask the school for a dedicated representative that can serve as a liaison with the Economic Development Commission and work to start hosting job fairs.

Chairman Haynie asked the EDC not to leave out Rappahannock Community College because they offer a lot of programs too. He suggested reaching out to them to see what advice they could give the County.

Mr. Johnson stated that he's heard the County has a languishing older workforce that's potentially not well employable today but would benefit from RCC, however economic challenges are preventing them from getting there. He asked what the County would be able to do to help the underemployed adults get back to being employable.

Vice Chairman Brann suggested that the County could host a job fair during the summer months to show the adults and children that there are opportunities here.

Dr. Pica stated that the EDC would take action on this, and she'd like to follow up with the school and find out why they cut the EMT teacher position.

Vice Chairman Brann informed Dr. Pica that RCC also has the EMT program, so why have that same program when you can complete it at RCC and end with an associate degree in applied science. He believes there is no reason to compete.

Dr. Pica agreed and stated that when looking at the big picture the County is saving money. She also explained that they're looking into grants to see what might be available to pay for some of those licenses and to offer scholarships.

Supervisor Long asked the EDC to consider transportation needs as well.

Mr. Kost stated that there are a lot of things to address but there are also a lot of assets. He referred to Social Services and wondered if this is their job or not? If RCC is a great asset, there's a need for which that asset should be applied. He asked how that is happening or if it is happening. Mr. Kost continued to ask questions such as: Is the Department of Social Services focused on this issue? Do they understand the needs of the County?

Supervisor Long stated that he could follow up with Mr. Kost on these questions because he'll be serving as the board representative on the local board of Social Services.

Vice Chairman Brann also suggested considering the resources available for parents who are willing to take classes to better themselves and need help with childcare.

Mr. Garfield Parker asked how technology is configured into the EDC's plan. Artificial intelligence (AI) is coming, and more people are going to be out of work. Mr. Parker asked if they have accounted for technology and its availability.

Dr. Pica stated that this process just started but they are looking into that. She further explained that they are looking at what assets are in the area, entrepreneurship, and the limitations of telecommunications and communications. Dr. Pica then asked what's next and how often they want to have these conversations to discuss their progress.

Vice Chairman Brann asked if Mr. Parker was referring to the All Points Broadband project in the County. He stated that this project is going to help bridge a lot of the gaps that County has had in the past, but it's not going to cover everything.

Mr. Kost stated that he comes from the IT industry and that Mr. Brann is spot on. He explained that the project takes a negative off the table by equalizing opportunity for a lot. Mr. Kost then referred to Mr. Parker's comment about AI and stated that it's going to have an impact on knowledge workers, but a lot of the workers they've discussed are not knowledge workers. He stated that AI will help those who know how things work, but no computer can come and fix his heating and air conditioning.

Mr. Parker disagreed and stated that we're in a rural County that's falling behind every year because of the new things coming in. He believes that if things don't change from what they are doing now, then they are going to be sitting here 5 years from now saying the same thing.

Vice Chairman Brann referred to the healthcare provided in the County. He stated that it's hard to bring new people in the County who need specific healthcare and it's hard to get those to stay due to the lack of health care.

Mr. Williams asked if it was too early to go around the table and list the businesses that the Board members believe are needed in the County. He stated that he sees a strong need for medical facilities in the County. Mr. Williams believes that the healthcare facilities are great, there just aren't enough of them. He also stated that the County needs more gas stations and restaurants.

Mr. Chris Cralle believes the County needs affordable housing.

Mrs. Melissa Bunns-Carter stated that she is working on workforce housing and independent senior living.

Chairman Haynie stated that cellphone service has gotten much better over the years and the County needs that and internet services to attract businesses.

Supervisor Long suggested that the County needs patients first, urgent care facilities.

Mr. Williams also suggested that a pharmacy is needed in the County.

Mr. Johnson stated that his children tell him that there's nothing to do in the County. If companies come in and bring their workforce here, the County needs to focus on retaining and stabilizing that business and it's workforce.

Supervisor Long stated that they should work to encourage the school system to do better because it used to be one of the best.

Vice Chairman Brann referred to the Christmas Tree Lighting ceremonies over the last two years and the Halloween Boo Bash this year. He stated that it's good for the County to invest back into the County.

Information: B. Planning Commission

No further discussion was made as comments from each Board were made simultaneously.

Information: C. Economic Development Commission

No further discussion was made as comments from each Board were made simultaneously.

3. Next Steps

Information: A. Future Meeting/Discussion

Dr. Pica asked the Boards how they can work together to move forward. She doesn't believe the Boards need to meet every month.

Chairman Haynie suggested quarterly meetings or meeting twice a year.

Vice Chairman Brann stated that it's important that the Boards stay engaged to see results.

Mr. Kost informed the Board that he is going to attend the EDC meetings to serve as the liaison between the Planning Commission and the EDC.

Supervisor Fisher stated that as the County plans, some realities need to be considered. Some realities are that the County is poor, and that Kilmarnock is the retail center of the Northern Neck. He stated that the County can grow, but when the planning starts, he suggests keeping the County's limitations in mind.

Dr. Pica stated that they'd come back in July, but in the meantime the EDC is going to work on the strategic plan, start engaging with the school, having discovery sessions to see what's out there, and consider where the primary industries are in the County.

Supervisor Long asked for clarification on how often this group will meet.

Dr. Pica stated that this group should meet every 6 months but the EDC will still meet every month to continue working on the plan.

4. Closing of Meeting

The Economic Development Commission's Chair, Dr. Karen Pica, adjourned to close the meeting.

The Planning Commission's Chair, Mr. Garfield Parker, adjourned to close the meeting.

Action: A. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn.

Motion by: AC Fisher, Jr., second by James W. Brann.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Aye: James M. Long, Richard F. Haynie, James W. Brann, Chip Williams, AC Fisher, Jr.