



Meeting Minutes
Agricultural Economic Development Advisory Board
May 6, 2020 – 7:30 p.m.
Virtual Meeting through WebEx being held pursuant to and in compliance with
Bedford County Ordinance #O 040620-01

Present: Pete Fellers, Don Gardner, Sam Gardner, Chuck Grove, Dorothy McIntyre, Ken Newman, Jeff Powers, Joy Powers, Lindsay Tomlinson,

Absent: Matt Baumgardner, Ronnie Gross, Pam Willoughby

Staff Present: Pam Bailey, Scott Baker, Traci Blido, Robert Hiss, Amanda Kaufman

Staff Absent: None

Transcriber: Julia Peters

Guests: John Graham - Graham Bass Farm; Mickey Johnson, Board of Supervisors, District 1

(1) CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Powers called the meeting to order pursuant to Bedford County Ordinance #O 040620-01, this meeting is being held electronically via WebEx.

Ms. Bailey took a roll call to verify those in attendance.

(2) APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Chairman Powers asked for a review of the May 6, 2020 agenda. There were no objections.

A motion by Joy Powers and a second by Ken Newman were made to approve the May 6, 2020 agenda, as presented.

Adopted unanimously

(3) APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES - March 4, 2020

Chairman Powers asked for a review of the March 4, 2020 meeting minutes.

A motion by Ken Newman and a second by Joy Powers were made to approve the March 4, 2020 meeting minutes, as amended.*

Adopted unanimously

*Dr. Gardner spoke later during the meeting that he had several corrections regarding some of his comments recorded in the March 4, 2020 meeting minutes. Due to an inadequate internet connection, he was unable to audibly express the corrections. Mrs. Blido responded to Dr. Gardner via the meeting chat option and instructed him to send her an email addressing the errors so they could be corrected.

(4) ADMINISTRATION REPORT

Mr. Hiss said the last two months have been an incredible chain of events. It has been eight weeks since all the changes were implemented to fight the spread of COVID-19. It has been a stressful time but overall the County has weathered it well so far, with approximately 35 or 36 cases diagnosed, no fatalities and few hospitalizations. From a public health perspective, things are progressing as best as they can. However, we cannot let our guard down because if we get sloppy, we are only one outbreak away from a difficult situation. On the economic side, Ms. Bailey, Mrs. Blido, other staff, the Lynchburg Regional Business Alliance (LRBA), the Workforce Investment Board, Chambers of Commerce, the Farm Bureau, and other agencies are thoroughly engaged in helping business owners navigate through programs they may benefit from during the shutdown. The Board of Supervisors (BOS) wants to get businesses up and opened sooner than later and they have told the Governor they don't think a "one size fits all" plan is necessary for every region in the state. We are currently waiting for the Governor to allow some businesses to open on May 15. Most of the County buildings and offices have been closed to the public but if the Governor relaxes or modifies his order, the County will open some offices on May 18 for in-person visits. Business should continue to be done through the mail, email, or dropbox options but staff recognizes that face-to-face visits are also important. The County budget process continues in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. The BOS has kept taxes the same as in the previous budget and government services for citizens have continued as they were. Going forward, the BOS has been wise to take a "wait and see" approach to see how revenues and expenditures track. So far the budget is level funded and no new revenues are anticipated. On the expenditure side, health and human services and social services need to be funded more and increases have been worked into the budget the best they can. The budget will be reviewed on a quarterly basis and adjustments will be made accordingly. There is currently a spending freeze and a hiring freeze in place and staff are being very cautious in terms of expenditures.

The Broadband Project is coming along and Blue Ridge Towers continues to construct the towers with four or five under construction now. The BOS extended the Blue Ridge Tower contract to August 14 and if the project continues at the current pace, the deadline should be met, although there have been some supply-chain challenges. Broadband has become even more important now and could play a major part for the school system going forward to the Fall school year. Comcast's fiber optic project in the Smith Mountain Lake area also continues to go well and there have been several meetings with Shentel to partner with them for some State grants to expand their services into other fiber projects.

(5) ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT REPORT

Mrs. Blido reported this has been a crazy ride and she and Ms. Bailey have never worked harder. She and Ms. Bailey and Ms. Zirkle from the Town have called dozens and dozens of companies, trying to find out what they need, what questions they have about grants, loans, and their need for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Several local companies are working within the COVID-19 space making very innovative products. She visited Nanotouch this week and they have had a 700% increase in sales for their disinfecting products due to COVID-19 and are looking to expand their building space very soon. They are setting up new automated industrial technology as part of their expansion and Sheldon Cash, Director of the County's Public Works, is putting the Nanotouch antiseptic stickers in all the County buildings on their doors so staff will be protected from catching the coronavirus.

Mrs. Blido and staff also assisted seven companies with a regional workforce grant to acquire PPE, as well as pay for child care for essential employees. Out of the 14 companies that received the grant, seven of them were in Bedford County; Valtim, LiteSheet, Peakview Counseling, Whitt Mechanical, Blue Ridge Overland Gear, Innerspec, and Simplimatic. Also during this time of COVID-19, Neathawk Lumber made an announcement and began to hire employees for their new location in Montvale.

The shell building in the New London Park has received much interest, and lots in Montvale Center for Commerce have also received inquiries. The Teva Pharmaceutical facility is winding down, but it may be possible to find a suitable prospect for the space given the extra efforts to expand medications for COVID response.

She also noted that the Economic Injury Disaster Loan/Grant Program (EIDL) is available to help those in agriculture during this time and can cover payroll as well as the business owner's own salary during the COVID-19 crisis. In Bedford County during the peak week of April 4 for initial claims, there were almost 1,000 people filing for unemployment. The unemployment rate prior to COVID-19 had been 2% in Bedford County so the crisis has had a devastating impact on our local area. Present and future work will now be directed toward recovery and she will keep the Ag Board members informed.

Mr. Graham notified the Ag Board members that independent contractors are qualified to receive unemployment benefits from a state-run program now if they have received a reduced income based on the current pandemic. Mrs. Blido said this program has helped some people that had not qualified previously for benefits.

(6) COOPERATIVE EXTENSION REPORT

Mr. Baker concurred with Mrs. Blido that the Small Business Administration Programs in place have a second round that can help ag businesses and he encouraged those that qualify to apply for the EIDL funds. The various federal stimulus bills with assistance funds will be administered through the USDA with direct payments to producers for losses, but also will purchase excess farm commodities to distribute to food pantries, etc. The direct payments to producers will be funneled through the Farm Service Agency of the USDA which will be rolled out later this month. The Extension office is open but with guidance from Virginia Tech, group programs are all on-hold through the summer including no traditional 4-H Camp this year. They are adapting and exploring other ways to provide educational experiences. Maribeth Martin has provided 4-H home learning kits to first responders to give to underserved families and those without computers. They hope to get some feedback and provide additional learning kits to those in need.

The Central Virginia Livestock Show (CVLS) was a virtual show this year, but all things considered, it went pretty well. Animals were shown online and sold with about 16 Bedford youth participating in some capacity. Mr. Baker was impressed with FFA advisors, volunteers, and Extension staff that worked to provide the show virtually rather than cancelling it. Bedford had the Senior Showmanship Champions in both swine and beef cattle and carcasses will be judged tomorrow.

Funds for the invasive weed management cost-share program was approved to be included in the proposed FY21 County budget.

Mr. Baker asked for feedback from the Ag Board members regarding how they can best respond to the needs of the ag community since it is a large sector of the County. Some meetings have been held with other County agencies about farm stress, farm safety, and mental health, but he is interested in what the Ag Board members have heard or know and what resources may be needed. The County now has a call center that can help citizens connect with resources based on their needs so he can pass on any input the Ag Board can give. Chairman Powers will send an email to Mr. Baker after giving the subject some thought. Mrs. Blido suggested collaborating with the Extension office, Economic Development Authority (EDA), and the Ag Board to spotlight some of the Bedford County farming families and how they are managing through the pandemic which would also raise public awareness.

(7) BEDFORD COUNTY FARM BUREAU/YOUNG FARMERS REPORT

Sam Gardner reported that there has not been a Farm Bureau/Young Farmers meeting since two meetings ago.

Chairman Powers noted that he had a meeting with Amy Johnson, Sheriff Miller, and Farm Bureau staff to begin working on billboards for farm safety. They are hoping to get the initiative moving with possible donations from Kubota, John Deere, Massey-Ferguson, and billboard companies.

(8) COMMITTEE REPORTS

a. Education & Events

1. Upcoming Events

Nothing new to report.

2. County Fair Update

Ms. Powers said that the fair is currently set for mid-October with no decision to cancel as of yet. Everything is on-hold for now and they will be able to make a decision once restrictions are lifted while also keeping an eye on what happens with the State Fair which is held before Bedford County's Fair. She will keep the Ag Board members updated as needed.

3. School Ag Programs Update

Ms. Powers reported that a Bedford County resident, Hunter Wimmer, participated in the National Young Farmer Collegiate Discussion Meet which was held online. He made the Sweet 16 and represented Bedford County very well.

Ms. Powers also reported that nine students from FFA and 4-H went to the University of Tennessee Livestock Judging Contest. Bedford County swept every senior division which was remarkable since it was their first time at the out-of-state, multi-state competition. The University of Tennessee department heads told the entire team that if any of them wanted a place on a college team, they could talk to them. One female student will be heading down to the University of Tennessee. Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, it changed things for students where livestock judging contests have been cancelled for the time being. They are, however, participating in virtual contests and virtual camps and continue to work hard. In Virginia 4-H, the highest honor is achieving the 4-H All-Star and this year four students were named 4-H All-Stars which is a huge accomplishment. The students are Ethan Jackson, Josh Powers, Samantha Holdren, and Andrew Tuck and we are all are very proud of them.

Ms. Tomlinson said the students enjoyed participating in the virtual CVLS which was an impressive event and thanked those who worked so hard to make it happen rather than just cancelling it. She also thanked Ms. Powers for continuing the student's learning virtually. On the FFA side, she and her ag teachers have been using this time to build on next year's classes. Both

FFA chapters have been working on applications for Proficiency Awards and State and American Degrees. Since school is closed, nothing can be done school-related so the students have had to do so much work on their own. It has been awesome to see them take initiative.

Mrs. Blido had received a communication from an individual who was interested in buying meat from one of the FFA or 4-H students. She asked Ms. Tomlinson if she could forward the request to her. Ms. Tomlinson said she would try to help that person connect with a student if possible. Ms. Tomlinson also noted that meat was available through vendors at the Bedford County Farmers' Markets as well. Mr. Baker suggested people could contact some producers listed in the Bedford Virginia Grown directory. Mr. Graham said he also had plenty of fish available for sale for interested customers.

b. Marketing & Production
1. Farmers' Market Update

Ms. McIntyre thanked Bedford County staff for helping her put the Forest Market together during this pandemic when she did not know how she was going to handle the process. She reported that her meat vendors were receiving amazing sales this year due to the difficulty in purchasing meat in grocery stores with the supply chain interrupted. One vendor did three month's worth of sales in three weeks and other vendors had their highest sales in ten years on opening day at the Forest Market. The challenge is getting product into the processors because they are being overwhelmed right now. Chairman Powers agreed. She stated she had 17 vendors selling agricultural and health care products and all had great sales. One produce vendor received over 100 pre-sales which helps the vendors cut down on wasted product. This Saturday the market will have pre-sales as well as on-site sales. There has been much interest in locally grown food and in CSA's. Hours have been adjusted due to the lack of available bathrooms but hand sanitizers are available at the market for customers and vendors to use and most people maintained good social distancing practices. This week the Forest Market will have 26 vendors. Customer counts ran about 240 people on the first two dates and all is going as well as can be expected. She said they will be using the normal location for this upcoming market and not the parking lot where the first two markets were held. Ms. McIntyre will be handing out free spatulas provided by the Ag Board at the market on the upcoming Mother's Day weekend.

Chairman Powers read the Bedford Market report he received from Mr. Gross. The Bedford Market began on May 1 and the McFaden's did a great job coordinating the opening day. Mr. Gross will be making breakfast sandwiches for all the vendors as a show of appreciation to them and they have a good crop of fruit this year and the market is up and running.

Chairman Powers made a brief point regarding how it is a tough time for small businesses but his business is much like Lowe's and hardware stores and he had a record month in April. Those staying home were buying products they could work with during the lockdown and he had to hire two additional part-time workers due to the increase in business. He said he has been blessed

with this positive aspect of a difficult situation. He also acknowledged and appreciated all the farmers who are working as hard as ever during this pandemic.

2. Coyote Lottery Update

Due to weak internet connection, Dr. Gardner was unable to give an audible report. Mrs. Blido noted that a report was given at the March 4 meeting which can be read in the March meeting minutes.

c. Land Protection & Conservation

Mr. Fellers had nothing new to report.

(9) INFORMATIONAL ITEMS

Ms. Powers had some notes regarding the Farm Bureau legislative report that she shared with the Ag Board members. Governor Northam signed the watershed implementation bill as written, but vetoed the milk labeling bill due to language in the bill that would not withstand a constitutional challenge. The Governor did propose amendments to a tree conservation bill and gave localities abilities to address climate change and flooding issues in the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Area. He also extended the implementation of the minimum wage bill until May 2021 but maintained the farm worker exemption and the foreign laborer exemption. Overall the Farm Bureau was pleased with the legislation that passed.

Mrs. Blido noted that Chuck Grove and Scott Baker were interviewed by WDBJ7 about the EIDL grant program for agricultural producers. Mr. Grove said the piece aired on the 5:30 p.m. news and he was asked about the impact of COVID-19 on farmers. He told them that producers cannot get their beef, poultry, or pork to market because of the break in the food chain, specifically the packing and processing plants where infected employees are unable to work. There is plenty of meat for the market, but until the packing industry can get back in business, product cannot get to the consumer. Mrs. Blido will share the interview on the Bedford Economic Development webpage for viewing by those interested.

(10) ADJOURNMENT

9:15 p.m.