

Meeting Minutes
Allegheny Highlands Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy
Committee

April 20, 2006

12 Noon, Room 509 of the Center for Continuing Education and Workforce Services
Building at Dabney S. Lancaster Community College

Committee Members:

Present: Suzanne Adcock, Annette Anderson, Carolyn Barnette, Don Carter, Stephanie Clark, Allen Dressler, Jack Hammond, Thomas Harris, Butch Kemper, Gail Johnson (Representing Dr. Richard Teaff by Proxy), Gary Partridge, David Price, George “Chip” Snead, Mark Taylor, John Williams, Bill Zimmerman

Absent: Glen Anglin, Robert Daniel, Phil Sparks, Tim Tobin, Christine Visscher, Alan Williams

Others Present:

John Hull, Regional Economic Resources Planner, RVARC
Wayne G. Strickland, Executive Director, RVARC
Eddie Wells, Senior Planner, RVARC

Proceedings:

· *Meeting called to order* at 12:00 Noon.

Welcome and Introductions:

Wayne Strickland welcomed committee members to the April meeting of the Allegheny Highlands Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Committee Meeting. Mr. Strickland noted that the main goal of the meeting was to work to finalize a project listing that will be incorporated into a draft CEDS document. Mr. Strickland asked John Hull to present results from the public information and comment session held in March.

Summary of Public Meeting Results:

- John Hull gave a presentation on the public meeting held on March 22, 2006 in the Clifton Forge Fire Department. Mr. Hull reported that the purpose of the first public meeting was to obtain public input on the goals and objectives. Mr. Hull reported that approximately 30-35 individuals visited the meeting and that 24 survey forms were returned from the event. Mr. Hull summarized the statistical findings from the survey and asked for any comments or questions.

-Wayne Strickland made note that no survey responses were received from anyone younger than 25 and asked the committee for ideas as to how get the youth in the region involved in the process.

- Committee Member Harris suggested that staff should call Dr. Bob Grimesey and/or other school officials in the region and see if the school systems might be interested in having staff give presentations to senior classes on the CEDS process. Mr. Harris mentioned that the appearance of demographic disparity in the survey results concerned him, given that one of the problems with the previous CEDS document was related to a lack of public involvement/outreach. Mr. Harris mentioned that the staff and the committee should seek to encourage more public involvement at every opportunity.

- Mr. Strickland said that staff will check into a possibility of presenting the material to a school in the Highlands region.

ACTION ITEM: Investigate the possibility of giving presentations on the CEDS process to high school students in the region. (*RVARC staff*)

Mr. Strickland reassured the committee that this CEDS development process has been much more open and accessible to the public. Mr. Strickland noted that there will be yet another public information session set up to receive public comments on the project listing, that meetings have been advertised using a variety of methods to include faxes and emails to Chamber members and other stakeholders, newspaper advertisements, distribution of a flyer, and by encouraging local governments in the region to make note of the upcoming meetings in board/council meetings. He mentioned that staff will also send meeting notices to the participants of the recent Economic Development Corporation's Economic Summit. The process that led to the previous document failed not only in engaging the larger public but in also in inspiring committee attendance. Mr. Strickland noted that of the 7 committee members developing the previous document, only 3 attended on average. Mr. Strickland mentioned that committee attendance in this CEDS development process has been good.

ACTION ITEM: Send meeting notices for upcoming public information and comment session to participants at the recent Economic Summit held by the Alleghany Highlands Economic Development Corporation. (*RVARC staff*)

- There was discussion regarding how some stakeholders remain confused as to how the CEDS and the Economic Summit differ. Mr. Harris noted that as long as the plans complement each other and as long as they do not compete it looks good in the eyes of Washington and Richmond.

- Committee Member Partridge noted that the AHEDC staff attempted to explain how the plans are different last week in the Economic Summit but yet similar to the extent that they both deal with the topic of economic development. The Summit has nothing to do with specific projects, he explained. Mr. Partridge stated that the Summit process is intended to look specifically at functions of an Economic Development Office – recruitment, retention, assisting prospects. The product of the CEDS process, on the other hand, is project specific and provides the basis for applying for grant funding. Mr. Partridge explained that from his perspective the Business Plan, the CEDS, and the Summit all complement each other in working towards the goal of regional economic development.

- Verbal comments summarized in the Public Meeting staff report sparked discussion of the Multiple Listing Service issue. Committee Member Dressler asked for an update on the status of efforts to bring realtors together to discuss the issue.

- Committee Member Snead reported that he has mailed a copy of correspondence received from the Roanoke Valley Association of Realtors to CEDS Committee Members. Mr. Snead noted that one of the most difficult obstacles is the lack of a realtor association in the area. He said the letter suggested that Highlands realtors could join the Roanoke Valley Association and make use of that association's MLS. After discussing the situation with Karen Knuckles, Executive Director of the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Snead believes that it might be best to have a small meeting with 1 member of the CEDS Committee, with 1 Chamber representative, and 1-2 realtors to discuss the issue before having a larger meeting to get more buy-in from realtors in the region. Mr. Snead stated that Ms. Knuckles wanted to field this suggestion before the CEDS committee to see if this is reasonable.

- The Committee indicated that this is a reasonable approach. Committee Member Taylor noted that care should be taken in selecting the realtors to attend the first, smaller meeting because some of the realtors in the region are opposed to the idea.

- The question was raised as to who should organize the meeting and send letters inviting realtors to the meeting. Mr. Snead stated that local government should probably not send initial letters as it may send the wrong message to area realtors; Mr. Snead thought it more appropriate that local, large employers send such a letter. Mr. Dressler suggested that letters from Human Resources professionals from area industry might indeed be more appropriate.

- Mr. Taylor mentioned that MeadWestvaco would be willing to cooperate and work together with the Chamber on the issue.

- Committee Member Hammond suggested that encouraging the realtors to establish a regional MLS is a process and will take time and that it may take several approaches to accomplish this end.

- Committee discussion centered on previous experience with realtors in the region and on the effect on business and economic development in the region. Mr. Snead agreed to plan with the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce staff to have a small discussion with 1-2 realtors and to strategize on how to move forward on the MLS issue.

ACTION ITEM: Meet with the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce staff and plan to have a small discussion with 1-2 realtors. Strategize with the AHCC on how to move forward on the MLS issue. (*Committee Member Snead*)

- Committee Member Price asked to make two comments. Mr. Price stated that he has attended several meetings related to broadband internet in previous months and made the observation that broadband is becoming a necessity for economic development and that when state and regional officials discuss bringing broadband to rural areas, they often are talking about towns like Covington and Clifton Forge. Mr. Price noted that bringing broadband to

areas with low population densities like Boiling Springs is unfortunately not on the agenda for many groups. Mr. Price noted that there needs to be a high quality community web site that represents the entire region so that all searches related to the Highlands point to a central web site.

- Mr. Price also wanted to take the opportunity to apologize to the YMCA Board for making an inaccurate statement to his constituents regarding a local contractor not being allowed to bid on the YMCA job. Mr. Price wanted to clarify that the individual was allowed to bid and that he was incorrect.

- Mr. Strickland thanked Mr. Price for his statements and agreed that a community portal can be important to economic development. Mr. Strickland mentioned that the General Assembly has passed legislation for funds and support of developing broadband technology in rural areas. He also mentioned that Matt Miller on the RVARC staff is currently looking into innovative wireless technologies and will support Alleghany County in its Technology Master Plan development starting in July.

Discussion of Proposed Project Listing:

- Discussion moved to the CEDS project listing and Eddie Wells asked committee members to make comments on the project listing as distributed prior to the meeting. Mr. Wells mentioned that his research into other CEDS documents indicates that the Alleghany Highlands CEDS is not atypical in having such a large number of projects. Mr. Wells noted that costs were pulled from several documents including the Highlands Regional Enterprise Business Plan, Capital Improvement Programs, and other plans and studies. Mr. Wells asked if committee members had any questions or comments about the material distributed prior to the meeting.

- Mr. Hammond commented on the \$3 Million estimated cost for the business incubator and stated that it will not be easy to obtain that much funding. Mr. Hammond asked if the various processes of an incubator might be performed in a different manner perhaps by taking a SCORE approach.

- Mr. Wells mentioned that the cost estimate came from the Highlands Regional Enterprise Business Plan and that he had questions regarding that estimate and other estimates from that document as well.

- Committee Member Clark stated that the incubator can be tied into downtown revitalization efforts as it would draw people downtown for seminars and other special events held at the incubator.

- Committee Member Anderson noted that there are numerous potential locations but making the incubator a reality will require planning and funding.

- Mr. Harris made the comment that the region needs a target industry study and more community participation locally. Mr. Harris said that the region needs to be focused and strategic in terms of what it plans to accomplish.

- Ms. Clark asked how many times do people need to meet before something is done and when is someone going to act on some of these items that are continually discussed.
- Mr. Harris stated that the CEDS is the process by which strategic decisions are made about what the community wants to do.
- Mr. Strickland commented that the people in the room are those who are empowered to effect change in the region. The CEDS committee, being made up of elected officials and chief administrative officials as well as business leaders, is empowered to make change in the community.
- Committee Members Kemper and Zimmerman noted that some of the planning work behind the business incubator has already been completed and the region stands ready to move forward. Mr. Zimmerman noted that the Grand Piano building in Downtown Covington could be a good location. Other potential locations were mentioned. Mr. Kemper noted that the Old Clifton Forge High School was shown to have the most potential in the incubator study.
- Mr. Strickland noted that the incubator can be moved up to the first priority group of projects and that the cluster study could be moved up as well. He noted that incubators do not necessarily need physical space as in the case of Portland (where a regional Leadership Trip was once held) where the incubator staff helped with business plans, accounting, legal and other questions and called the operation a 'virtual incubator.' Committee Member Adcock mentioned that retired volunteers could be an alternative as well.
- Mr. Harris noted that he would like to see the historic renovations broken out into separate projects and that doing so would help move more aggressively on renovating downtowns.
- Mr. Wells asked if there were additional historic buildings that should be included in the renovations project?
- Mr. Zimmerman noted that the old CSX Freight Depot in Covington should be included.
- Mr. Harris noted that it is his opinion that the estimated costs are not as important as having a list of identified project needs.
- Mr. Strickland asked the committee to go through the project listing with RVARC staff and to resolve any lingering staff questions regarding any of the projects.
- Mr. Wells asked if the different activities under the Warehouse Relocation should be broken out in more detail or if one lump sum for the entire project should be reported.
- Ms. Adcock commented that the less specific in terms of individual activities perhaps the better as it would leave those in charge of implementation a bit of room in making project changes and other important decisions if only one lump sum for the entire project were reported.

- Mr. Snead commented that the Jackson River Scenic Trail estimate did not appear accurate and stated that it should be increased from \$200,000 to approximately \$375,000. He stated that implementation will take place over time and that the County is doing some work now but that the trail will not be complete until 2008. Mr. Snead commented that a lot of the estimates should be understood as 'moving targets' with construction costs going up every month.

- Mr. Strickland asked the committee if the business incubator should be left in the project listing with its current estimate of \$3.75 Million. The Committee agreed that it should be left in the listing as is.

- Mr. Harris mentioned that the Clifton Forge Water Plant Expansion, Water Meters at \$2.9 Million, and the Clifton Forge Water Tank at \$1 Million should all be included under Regional Water and Sewer Needs.

- Mr. Snead commented that the Westgate Water Tank should be changed to Iron Gate Water Tank to more accurately reflect its geographic location.

- Committee Member Williams asked if the Douthat project included water/sewer improvements.

- Mr. Wells noted that cost estimates for the Douthat Enhancement Project include only additional cabins and other park-related improvements; water improvements are listed under Regional Water and Sewer Needs only.

- Mr. Strickland asked if the US 220 and the Rail Infrastructure were meant to be advocacy projects only and if the committee thinks the projects should remain on the list.

- The Committee agreed that the projects should remain on the list as advocacy projects. Mr. Snead noted that the Buckingham Branch Railroad should be included as a potential partner for the rail infrastructure improvements.

- Mr. Strickland asked the Committee about the AET site project. Mr. Kemper stated that he thought the project should be put on hold for now but not taken off of the CEDS project listing.

- Mr. Strickland asked the Committee if the Public Relations function project should stay on the list as a half-time equivalent employee and noted that it would have to be funded completely with local money. Mr. Zimmerman noted that it could be another role for a potential tourism office that has been discussed.

- Mr. Wells asked the committee if the Business Retention and Expansion project should be a staff member or incentive funds. The committee indicated that the BRE project should be an incentive fund.

- Mr. Strickland asked Mr. Harris if implementation funds should be included as subcategories under the Clifton Forge Town-wide Housing Strategy project. Mr. Harris indicated that implementation funds should be listed.

- Mr. Strickland asked Gail Johnson from Dabney S. Lancaster Community College for any updates on the School of Forestry project. Ms. Johnson stated that she would speak to Vice President Gary Keener who has been in discussions with Virginia Tech about an expanded 4-year forestry program at DSLCC and get back to the staff.

ACTION ITEM: Share updated information on costs and other considerations for 4-Year School of Forestry Project. (*Dabney S. Lancaster Community College*)

- Mr. Strickland asked Mr. Harris if the Clifton Forge Rail Yard Redevelopment project included Congressman Boucher's appropriation in the cost estimate. Mr. Harris stated that it did. Mr. Harris elaborated stating that the original redevelopment plan called for renovations of the buildings but most companies who have been taken to the site ask how soon demolitions can take place. Exact plans for the site have yet to be determined.

- Mr. Wells stated that the project would be reported as a lump sum to leave flexibility on the project approach.

- Mr. Harris asked Mr. Snead if they had received preliminary information from Columbia Gas Company that a gas line may exist in proximity of the site. Mr. Snead stated that he thought preliminary information may have suggested that a low pressure gas line exists somewhere on the western side of Clifton Forge but that it is probably too small and at too low of a pressure to serve industry. Current rough estimates indicate that it would cost \$4.9 Million to run a gas line from the Commerce Center to the Rail Yard.

- Mr. Taylor asked if the CEDS project listing was too large or overly ambitious in its scope.

- Mr. Wells agreed that it is a large number of projects.

- Mr. Taylor stated he was concerned that if the region tries to do too many things it will do nothing very well.

- Mr. Hammond stated that the committee should remember that this is simply an exercise in asking for money from the federal government. Mr. Strickland explained that by including these projects in the plan you are telling the federal government that these are important projects that will help transform the community and provide for a better economic future. It is understandable that people will say that the region will never do it all. Some things, he explained, can simply roll over after the initial 5-year implementation. Mr. Harris explained that a document of this sort strengthens the region's chances when there are opportunities at the state and federal level as it shows the the region has come together to think strategically about what it needs. Mr. Harris likened the CEDS to a regional CIP and stated that it will evolve over time; he asserted that other regions have a lot of projects in their CEDS documents.

- Mr. Wells agreed that the listing is not atypically large for a CEDS document. Mr. Strickland mentioned along the lines of grant opportunities that the Commission plans to incorporate an electronic grant announcement system next year to inform local governments and stakeholders of state government, federal government, and private foundation grant opportunities. Mr. Strickland noted that the CEDS is ambitious but he argued there will be successes.

- Ms. Adcock asked if the CEDS is handled as an 'all-or-nothing' grant application. Mr. Strickland explained that the CEDS is simply a first step. Individual grant applications will be made from the projects listed on the CEDS. Annual meetings will be held in the future and any completed projects will simply be taken off and reported as a regional successes.

Next Steps:

- Mr. Hull announced the location change for the next CEDS Committee Meeting (to be held on May 18, 2006 in room 375A of the Scott Hall Building at DSLCC at 12 Noon). Mr. Hull mentioned that the goal of this meeting is to have committee approval of a CEDS draft document to forward on to the local governments in the region for approval.

ACTION ITEM: Develop draft document and share with CEDS committee in advance of the next scheduled CEDS committee meeting on May 18th. (*RVARC staff*)

- Mr. Hull mentioned the upcoming public information session to be held on May 4 in Council Chambers of Covington City Hall where public will be given the opportunity to comment on the proposed project listing. Mr. Hull asked everyone in the room to help promote the meeting so that there will be a greater turnout and mentioned that the flyer is available from the project web-site to download and distribute.

- Mr. Strickland noted that staff hopes to have EDA approval in September 2006 and that representatives from EDA are aware that the region is working on a CEDS and await receipt of the plan for review. He thanked the committee for its continued attendance and interest.

· Meeting adjourned at 1:45 p.m.

· Minutes submitted by John M. Hull, Regional Economic Resources Planner.