

**KANDIYOHI COUNTY AND CITY OF WILLMAR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION (EDC)  
MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES**

**October 25, 2021**

**Multi-Tech Conference Room, MinnWest Technology Campus and via Zoom Video Conference**

Present: Elizabeth Dyrdal, Melissa Knott, Emily Lien, Pam Rosenau and Brittany VanDerBill

Excused: Donna Boonstra and Jesse Gislason

Staff: Aaron Backman, Executive Director and Sarah Swedburg, Business Development Manager

Secretarial: Cathy Skindelien, Legal & Administrative Assistants, Inc.

Chairperson Emily Lien called the meeting to order at approximately 11:57 p.m.

**AGENDA**—Aaron Backman added Small Business Promotion to the agenda as Item 4e.

IT WAS MOVED BY Melissa Knott, SECONDED BY Brittany VanDerBill to approve the revised Agenda. MOTION CARRIED.

**MINUTES**—

IT WAS MOVED BY Melissa Knott, SECONDED BY Brittany VanDerBill to approve the Minutes of the July 26, 2021 meeting as e-mailed. MOTION CARRIED.

**SOCIAL MEDIA STATISTICS**—

**Facebook Statistics.** Backman compared August and September numbers to earlier results. Post reach has increased from 1450 in May-June to 2052 in July-August and 3439 in September-October. Likes were comparable, with 786 in May-June, 791 in July-August and 803 in September-October. While there were a few negative interactions, the vast majority were positive. The top posts for the period of September 1<sup>st</sup> through October 21st were as follows:

1. **The West Central Minnesota Job Fair.** Over 1000 people were reached. The job fair was held at the Ridgewater gymnasium and was attended by students and the general public. Sarah Swedburg reached out to local high schools, including Atwater-Cosmos-Grove City (ACGC), Bird Island-Olivia-Danube (BOLD), Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg (KMS), Maynard-Clara City-Raymond (MACCRAY), New London-Spicer (NL-S) and Willmar. A large number of high-school students attended. Free pizza was offered to Ridgewater College students, who signed in with five prospective employers. Twice as many vendors participated compared to the last job fair, which was affected by the pandemic. Another job fair in Mankato only had half the people they were expecting. Kandiyohi County was able to boost its attendance

with strategic planning. Large businesses were targeted approximately three to four weeks in advance, followed by the medium-sized businesses. The majority of vendors signed up in the last two weeks.

2. **Guide to navigating a roundabout.** The various issues encountered at roundabouts were discussed, including the confusion created when the Global Positioning Systems (GPS) are not updated when a roundabout is added. Knott suggested that comments and reactions would increase if the post were a little more engaging, with questions such as are you comfortable going through a roundabout. This will encourage interaction plus it could help dictate the content of future posts.
3. **Grand opening of Bethesda North Pointe.** Backman encouraged everyone to take a tour of this facility.

Top posts from July 21<sup>st</sup> through August 31<sup>st</sup> included the Senator Amy Klobuchar visit to the Barn Theatre, the purchase of Glacial Ridge Winery by The Land by Model Citizen, the Elevate Business Academy informational session, the Kandi Land Farm opening and Brouwer Berries being selected Kandiyohi County's University of Minnesota Extension Farm Family of the Year.

#### **UNFINISHED BUSINESS—**

**Marketing and Communications Specialist Position.** Backman reported Kelsey Olson accepted the position of Marketing and Communications Specialist. There was a great response to the job posting, with 16 applications that yielded 4 solid candidates. Olson is from New London and has been the interpretive naturalist for Sibley State Park for seven years. She was recommended unanimously by the review committee. Olson has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Environmental Evaluation and Interpretation from the University of Wisconsin with a focus on communication and public relations. She managed the New London Oral History Project and an interactive website, created media including interpretive signs, brochures and handouts and responds to all media requests. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has utilized Olson's talents for system-wide activities including a state-wide guide for creating YouTube videos. She has done FaceBook live for the DNR. Olson is an active volunteer, serving as a board member for the Sibley State Park Improvement Association and the Middle Fork Crow River Watershed District and on the New London Human Rights Commission. She has won several awards, including the Minnesota DNR Commissioner Award for Conservation Enhancement, the Trails Customer Service Training Team in the category of Operational Excellence, and the Minnesota DNR Parks and Trails Outstanding Customer Service Award with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion, which focused on outreach to Native Americans.

Olson's new position will be flexible, with up to two days working remotely and two days in the office. She just had a baby and is currently on leave from the DNR. She will start in November with a ramp up schedule that will transition to full time the last week in December. Backman and Swedburg have been collecting items for her to work on, including creating a newsletter similar to the *Low-Down*, which is being done in Chisago County. Olson plans to get involved with the Willmar Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and Ridgewater College.

**Broadband Project.** Swedburg reported the broadband projects are moving along well and she looks forward to fresh ideas from Olson. While the EDC's Broadband and Advanced Technology Committee has concentrated on funding for various projects, it needs to start focusing on education around the technology, how it is used and how to adapt and implement the services. There is an opportunity to promote assistance at the state level for paying a portion of low-income resident's internet bill. Senator Tina Smith was recently in Willmar to discuss the broadband projects in Kandiyohi County. Thirty-five people attended representing the townships, county and the Broadband Committee. The meeting was covered by the *West Central Tribune*, *Lakes Area Review*, KWLM radio and the Blandin Foundation.

The Broadband Committee is awaiting results on grants that have been submitted and waiting for others to open up. These frustrations were shared with Senator Smith. According to Smith what Kandiyohi County is experiencing is a nation-wide problem. Senator Smith worked on broadband projects prior to becoming Senator and has a strong interest in reaching the rural areas, which is very promising.

Pam Rosenau mentioned many companies are dropping cable because streaming is becoming more popular. Education is needed on streaming and cyber-crime, including ransomware and phishing emails. Businesses, employees and job seekers should be targeted for education. On-demand training would be beneficial. There are businesses in Kandiyohi County prepared to do this type of education and Swedburg mentioned that we should use what is out there rather than re-inventing the wheel.

Backman attended a Minnesota Association of Professional County Economic Developers (MAPCED) meeting on Friday, October 22, where the Deputy Director for the Office of Broadband Development presented information about the Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership for providing equipment to low-income households. The Deputy Director thought the use of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, as well as state funds, for broadband projects should be allowed but written approval is still necessary. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) grant will be announced on or near November 29. If received, this would cover up to 88% of the cost for seven townships in Kandiyohi County. The provider, Federated Telephone Cooperative, would cover the balance. Another project is the City of Prinsburg, that has been awarded funds and the provider, Arvig, is ready to begin. Charter Communications has reconfigured its pricing for several areas in the New London-Spicer area so there will be developments there as well. There is no news on LTD Broadband, this will be on hold until the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) makes its decision. If Kandiyohi County is able to get a project funded before LTD Broadband is approved it may be able to move forward without them.

**Opportunity Zone/Renaissance Zone Prospectus Update.** Backman reported that when Olson's employment begins the Opportunity Zone (OZ)/ Renaissance Zone (RZ) prospectus will be divided into a separate prospectus for each. Further discussion will take place when Olson is on board.

A developer will meet with the EDC next week, representing another opportunity for multi-family housing investment. During the first week of October, Unique Opportunity got permits for phases 3 and 4, which are 144 units. Phase 4, an \$8.4 million project, has been accelerated by two years. Near WalMart, Preserve on 24<sup>th</sup> will be constructing 72 units in two buildings which should be ready

by next spring. Block 25 Lofts has run into environmental challenges, including perchloroethylene (PCEs) near the old dry cleaner, petroleum issues and construction debris. The worst-case scenario is having to remove 30,000 cubic yards of material which translates to 1500 loads or \$450,000 worth of material. A vapor barrier may add \$100,000 to the cost. They are already \$400,000+ into the project. Block 25 Lofts will consist of 58 units on four levels with underground parking on the lower level. Other amenities include a dog park, roof patio and community room. The developer has extensive experience in greater Minnesota and has worked with Brownfield Redevelopment on clean up before. The development will consist of one- and two-bedroom apartments. Another developer is working with an architect on a Block 50 potential project between the hospital and library.

**Willmar Industrial Park Flyer Update.** Swedburg reported as the logistics project moves forward the property pictured on the Willmar Industrial Park flyer will need to be listed as sold. The EDC will need to get access to the files of the Industrial Park Flyer as well as the Agriculture flyer from REDstar. These will be good projects for Olson. Suggested updates included fly-over imagery, which would show all changes to Highway 12 and other roads, including the roundabouts; and show a bigger geographic area to include the Willmar Wye project progress. This could entice anyone who needs rail options to consider the Industrial Park. The Fourth Addition investment by the City was \$3 million for roads, water and sewer. RDC National's \$26 million logistics project will generate taxes that will make that long-term investment pay off. The same thing applies farther west with the rail, this is both a short-term and long-term investment. In the short-term, the question is who can we get to look at it? The long-term question would involve extending roads. Other suggestions included adding more color variety to the pictures of the businesses, and highlighting businesses that are actually in the industrial park.

**Small Business Promotion.** Swedburg reported there is a lot of room to support small businesses at the EDC and it needs ideas to better explain how it accomplishes this. Mid-Minnesota Development Commission is doing a targeted promotion for its loans and has done printed yard signs. Other possible approaches are videos and being diligent in taking pictures of businesses that have been helped with the purchase of a building, truck, etc. Ridgewater College has a multimedia course that has student teams helping local businesses with marketing, social media, etc. Swedburg has connected several Elevate students to this service. In addition to setting up the Facebook page, they walk them through how to create a post. Pictures of Ridgewater students working with diverse business owners would be helpful. The students enjoy working with and helping real businesses.

Community leaders understand what the EDC does, but small businesses don't always understand. The EDC needs to break down that barrier. When a small business is asked how the EDC can help, they don't know where to start. Knott suggested asking direction questions, such as what are your biggest challenges, what is your 5-year plan and how can we help you get there, will probably generate more answers. Rosenau mentioned that the Google representative can help them get on the map and claim their business at no cost. Rosenau will introduce Olson to the Google representative. Olson's first official start date is November 16.

**NEW BUSINESS**—Swedburg reported that Elevate has nine students. They have completed week 6, which is halfway through the course. Testimonies from the first cohort are being finalized. There will be a third cohort in March. Translation of documents to Somali is being considered as there are 15 potential students who would take the course if the documents were translated. Swedburg is working with REDstar to finalize the invitations to graduation on December 17, which will again be held at the Willmar Education and Arts Center (WEAC). Testimony videos will be one tool used to share funding partnership opportunities with local banks and small business consultants. Elevate was highlighted in the *IMPACT* magazine published by the *West Central Tribune*. The Southwest Initiative Foundation (SWIF) continues to support the Elevate program and applications have been submitted for other grants.

Rosenau reported attending a meeting for the Partners in Ag Innovation Conference, where they discussed the results of the July event. They are ramping up with ideas for the 2022 event, which will be held the last Tuesday in July. Survey responses contained a lot of good feedback about the stories being told at the 2021 event. People enjoyed the small business stories about how they originated, their struggles and how they were able to become bigger and better in spite of the pandemic. Brouwer Berries, this year's Farm Family of the Year, will be invited to share their story along with Lettuce Abound, which has shifted into Hemponix. Broadband in relation to farming was another topic that could be addressed.

**NEXT MEETING**—The next meeting is **12 noon, Monday, November 22, 2021** in-person at the Multi-Tech Conference Room, MinnWest Technology Campus and via ZOOM video conference.

**ADJOURNMENT**—There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:15 p.m.