

**KANDIYOHI COUNTY AND CITY OF WILLMAR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION (EDC)  
BUSINESS RETENTION AND EXPANSION/RECRUITMENT COMMITTEE MEETING  
MINUTES**

**September 3, 2021**

**EDC Boardroom and Via ZOOM Video Conference**

Present: Corky Berg, Jim Ellingson, Les Heitke and Bridget Paulson (acting chair via Zoom)

Excused: Sam Bowen, Samantha Crow, Roger Imdieke, Jennifer Mendoza, Dean Steinwand and Kelly TerWisscha

Staff: Sarah Swedburg, Business Development Manager

Secretarial: Cathy Skindeliem, Legal & Administrative Assistants, Inc. (LAA)

Acting Chair Bridget Paulson called the meeting to order at approximately 11:05 a.m.

**MINUTES**—Because there was no quorum the minutes will be approved at the next meeting on December 3, 2021.

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS—**

**Elevate Class Update.** Sarah Swedburg reported there were four informational sessions on the Elevate program in August and there will be one more on Wednesday, September 8<sup>th</sup> at 5:00 at The Goodness. Classes will begin on Thursday, September 16<sup>th</sup>. The first class will be a one-hour gathering to help people navigate how to do homework on-line, how to watch videos on-line, do introductions and discuss whether to do in-person or virtual meetings going forward. Rising Tide suggested that most classes be virtual, with three sessions that will involve live-action business simulation games. The program will run 12 weeks on Thursdays from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Graduation will be held on December 15<sup>th</sup>. Fifteen people have gone through the informational sessions. Three people have turned in their applications. The maximum for the class is 18 people, with 10-12 targeted. In-person meetings will be held at The Goodness. The owners of The Goodness, Nick and Candace Aker, will also be taking the course.

A recording of an informational session is available in case anyone is unable to attend the September 8<sup>th</sup> meeting. The strong interest in the program is encouraging. The *West Central Tribune* publishes the *Impact* magazine in October each year, and it will feature the Elevate program. The Southwest Initiative Foundation (SWIF) is interested in expanding the program to other communities and is using Willmar as an example. There is a matching grant program in technical assistance to small businesses, and Elevate fits well. The EDC will assess how much money should be requested. This would be an opportunity to train more instructors and build a broader foundation for the program for the sake of sustainability. This grant would provide funds through June of 2023. Holding a Somali-English class has been

considered. Grant money could be used for translation of curriculum, as there are some students who aren't comfortable with an all-English class.

Les Heitke asked about the Afghanistan situation and whether there are any refugees expected to arrive in this area. The EDC hasn't heard anything at this point. Swedburg reported that a gentleman they met through the Community Venture Network (CVN) works with Puerto Ricans and would like to partner with the EDC in connecting job opportunities. Paulson asked how the previous Elevate graduates are doing. There were three grocery store owners, a gymnastics business and a transportation company. Swedburg replied that the Business Support Subcommittee is working to develop an automated system for staying in contact with Elevate graduates. Chaw's Asian Market has recently opened and is currently waiting for EBT approval, which will help business considerably. Amin Grocery just purchased the Public Defenders building. Paulson suggested creating some success story videos with the graduates.

**Marketing and Communications Specialist Update.** Swedburg reported the EDC received 16 applicants for the Marketing and Communications Specialist position. Six have been selected to be interviewed, with one declining due to accepting another position. There has been great local interest in this position. In addition to the resume and cover letter, the applicants were asked to send in work they had done. As part of the interview process they were given a task to create a mock flyer presenting three sites to a potential developer. Interviews will be conducted on September 8<sup>th</sup> and the EDC hopes to have someone in place by early October.

**NEW BUSINESS**—Several topics were discussed, including the new Subway being built on First Street, lack of activity at the old Dairy Queen location, contamination issues due to a previous gas station in the Block 25 area, the Willmar Lakes Association annual meeting discussion of purchasing a water mower that can handle the weed beds in Willmar Lake and Foot Lake, harvesting carp and the Hawk Creek Watershed project.

#### **REPORTS—**

**Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services (CMJTS) Update.** Paulson reported there is funding available to do training for individuals and businesses. Currently CMJTS is recruiting for a program at Ridgewater College in Hutchinson to serve women, people of color and people with barriers to get a certificate in industrial maintenance. There will be a welding program at Ridgewater College in Willmar. Renville County Jail will conduct a welding program for people scheduled to be released within 90 days. They are working with employers to think outside the box when hiring, to consider job accommodation, hour accommodation, flexible schedules, looking at people they might not have considered before and doing duty carving based on a person's strengths. CMJTS is still having trouble getting trainees. Paulson partners with Jennifer Mendoza at Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio (CLUES) in getting referrals. There is funding available for incumbent workers. Businesses are struggling to fill positions at this point so it is hard to work on incumbent worker projects. There was a hiring event in Renville County which drew several employers but not as many job seekers. There will be an in-person hiring event at Ridgewater College in Willmar on October 13<sup>th</sup>. CMJTS is working with Tom Hoff at the Launch Your Future Today (LYFT) Foundation on a website called *Future Forward*, a resource website for high schools and local businesses. Participating businesses will do high school tours, mock interviews, information interviews, apprenticeships and will work directly with local high school classrooms to provide services and career exploration tools to local youth. The website can be accessed by teachers to

connect their students with local employers. The goal is to have more youth stay in the community and grow.

Heitke asked if Paulson was familiar with a program called The Fortress, the residential program for recovering men and those who have completed their prison sentence. They house a maximum of 18 people who are allowed to stay for three months with their rent paid by local churches. To continue living there after three months they need to pay their own rent. They are very motivated and would like to get connected in the job world. Opioids – The Minnesota Initiative (OMNI) is a grant for people who have been directly or indirectly affected by opioids, people who are themselves in recovery, family members, children, parents, co-workers or people who would like to go into career pathways for recovery and treatment. Paulson will look at doing presentations on this at the Fortress.

Swedburg asked about Commercial Driver's License (CDL) programs. Paulson replied they regularly receive grant money from Pathways to Prosperity to fund programs that are run consecutively. They also do incumbent worker training programs, where they pay for a portion of CDL training for current employees of participating businesses. Paulson requested that the EDC refer anyone interested in CDL programs to her. Current bottlenecks include lack of training instructors, having to do one-on-one training due to COVID, and the CDL testing process.

**Workforce Development Subcommittee Discussion.** Swedburg reported the Job Fair will be on October 13<sup>th</sup> at Ridgewater College from noon until 5:00 p.m. There will be coupons for slices of pizza for the students, along with \$20.00 Kwik Trip gift cards for giveaways. The Workforce Development Subcommittee had a Zoom meeting with the Principals of New London-Spicer and Willmar Senior High Schools to discuss workforce development. Due to the logistical nightmare trying to transport students to area businesses, video tours were the preferred platform suggested. The EDC and SWIF are key sponsors of Central Minnesota Manufacturing Month, which is held in October. There are a couple schools interested in officially signing on, and businesses are being recruited to participate. Many manufacturers already have videos that could be used as an introduction to their business. There will also be a virtual magazine that will exist in perpetuity, this is an advertisement and workforce-seeking opportunity for the manufacturing businesses.

**Business Support Subcommittee Discussion.** Swedburg reported the Business Support Subcommittee has been discussing childcare. Another task is reaching out to businesses that received COVID relief support, such as COBAL loans or MPR and CPR grants, to see how they are doing now and get an idea of their continuing needs. They are working on a survey of 3-5 questions to get in touch with those who would normally respond, and then drill down to those more in need of personal outreach to gather information about how the EDC can help in the future. Paulson has made some connections with the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) and Careerforce for a virtual job fair. Since Careerforce is involved, the job fair will be regional instead of just for Kandiyohi County, but it will be a good starting point to receive guidance on how to manage a virtual job fair and get active participation. The new Marketing hiree will be very helpful in this process. The virtual job fair can handle up to 20 employers in South Central Minnesota and will be done shortly after the new year.

East Litchfield Avenue which is in the Renaissance Zone was discussed. The houses are run-down but are home to quite a few people. Swedburg stated there are provisions pertaining to temporary housing for displaced people in the Renaissance Zone. There was concern that this area is the "front door" to the city and leaves a bad impression on visitors. Swedburg stated that the EDC sits on the Vision 2040 Housing Subcommittee and they have also discussed this area.

**ADJOURNMENT**—There being no other business,

IT WAS MOVED, SECONDED AND CARRIED to adjourn the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 12:03 p.m.

**NEXT MEETING**—The next committee meeting is **11:00 a.m., Friday, December 3, 2021** at the EDC Boardroom and via ZOOM video conference.