

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

MINUTES

March 3, 2023

EDC Boardroom and Via ZOOM Video Conference

Present: Corky Berg, Samantha Crow (via Zoom), Jim Ellingson, Steve Gardner, Les Heitke, Roger Imdieke and Kelsey Vosika

Excused: Sam Bowen, Jennifer Mendoza and Bridget Paulson

Absent: Mary Warszynski

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

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

Chair Jim Ellingson called the meeting to order at approximately 11:02 a.m.

AGENDA—3 items were added to the agenda under New Business:

- Discussion of the new position filled by the City of Willmar
- Meeting date and time
- Election of Officers

IT WAS MOVED BY Roger Imdieke, SECONDED BY Kelsey Vosika, to approve the revised Agenda.
MOTION CARRIED.

MINUTES—

IT WAS MOVED BY Corky Berg, SECONDED BY Les Heitke, to approve the Minutes of the December 2, 2022 meeting as emailed. MOTION CARRIED.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS—

Virtual Career Fair Update. Aaron Backman reported a virtual career fair was held on January 18, 2023. This was the second virtual career fair held, and the first one under the EDC's contract with Premier Virtual. Redwood and Renville Counties were partners. Forty-one businesses registered for the event, and 30 job seekers participated. Interaction was good, with over 200 conversations held between businesses and job seekers, and 18 resumes were submitted. Another virtual career fair will be held in late May, followed by an evaluation of the one-year contract with Premier Virtual. Meeker County will join the partnership and Kelsey Olson has approached the City of Hutchinson about joining as well. Partners have the option to create their own job fair, but most seem more comfortable with the group setting. The next virtual career fair will remain open until 8:00 p.m. to accommodate those who work during the day and job seekers will not be required to submit a resume when registering.

Elevate Class Update. Sarah Swedburg reported on the graduation of the largest Elevate Community Business Academy class to date, 11 students. It was a diverse group ranging in age from 23 to 73. The spring session kickoff was held on March 2, 2023; the class will be offered in English and Spanish. The English class is full, with 15 people registered and 15 more making inquiries. The Spanish class has 10 students. Danny Carranza, who is currently employed by the Latino Economic Development Commission, will teach the Spanish class. Swedburg is anticipating a Somali class in the fall. There are three Somali women taking the English class, who may have the opportunity to become instructors for the program. Swedburg made Elevate presentations to several groups, including the City of Red Wing, the Minnesota Association of Professional County Economic Developers and Ridgewater College. College credit for the class is under consideration. The Willmar Multicultural Club will hold an event at the end of March which will feature a panel of Elevate students. Willmar was the first rural community in the United States to offer the program, and it is now offered in rural areas in Illinois and Louisiana. A wide variety of businesses are represented, including a boutique, medical-based company, graphic design, wine and whiskey bar, holistic health practitioner, realtor, trucking, goat farmer, gymnastics and a bakery. The value of the program was expressed by Abdiweli Yusuf, owner of Amin Grocery. He stated “I can’t believe this is where I’m at. I never thought I would be able to do this. We came here 16 years ago and couldn’t speak English. Now we are fully participating in the American Dream.” Yusuf began his business by leasing a small space and now owns a building. Swedburg has formed a community of alumni who get together for various activities. Thirty-one students have graduated. Swedburg would like to move to a more administrative role and create an advisory council to meet bi-annually to discuss improvements. Elevate has become a great marketing tool for the entire region.

Ridgewater College Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) Grant Update/Next Steps. Backman reported Ridgewater College has completed the predesign phase for the Targeted Communities Capital Project Grant, which was awarded to upgrade the Ridgewater CDL program. The funding must be used for physical improvements. The college is working with the Department of Employment and Economic Development on a contract to obtain the funding, and when that is finalized construction will begin.

Business Support Education Series. Swedburg reported a new Business Support Education Series will be created to capitalize on the Premier Video contract. There will be weekly events, with a mix of online and in-person options. Topics include logistics, inventory management, buying and selling businesses and specialty social media. There will be a series of 12 topics on this platform, with a YouTube page established for the content.

NEW BUSINESS—

Housing Studies. Backman reported the completion of the housing studies for the City of Willmar and for all of Kandiyohi County. The studies were funded by the following partners:

- Kandiyohi County Housing Redevelopment Authority - \$22,000
- City of Willmar - \$12,000
- West Central Realtors Association - \$10,000
- EDC - \$4,000

The need for more housing was highlighted. The forecast includes a need of 1,580 additional housing units in Willmar and 975 in greater Kandiyohi County. The biggest component is senior housing, which will need 1,000 additional units—600 with services (assisted living, memory care, etc). and 400 for seniors 55+ rental. One challenge identified is staffing to address the service components. Discussions have begun and the study has been sent out to 47 interested parties, including 7 developers. In 2021 Bethesda spent \$17 million at the North Pointe campus in New London and clearly sees a need for additional expansion. Bethesda has a waiting list and could easily fill 30-40 more independent living units today.

The population in Willmar is projected to increase by 2,600+ in the next 8 years with half of the increase in the 75-84 age group. The 25 and under age group tends to rent housing, while the 55-64 age group contains twice as many homeowners as renters. After age 75, more people go back to renting as they downsize and move away from independent living. The population projections in greater Kandiyohi County are going down slightly, but more housing will be needed as the number of households in the area increases. Older adults will be looking for townhomes. Housing affordability will be an issue, with rising interest rates and the average selling price of homes rising:

- Willmar 2018 - \$136,000
 2022 - \$180,000
- Spicer 2018 - \$168,000
 2022 - \$247,000
- Kandiyohi County 2018 - \$150,000
 2022 - \$205,000

New City Hire. Pablo Obregon is Willmar’s new Director of Community Growth. The position was funded by a grant of \$450,000 over two years from Blue Cross Blue Shield. The city will determine whether to continue the position after that time. The position will start on March 13, 2023. The position will have two elements, working internally with the City of Willmar and interacting with the community. Interaction between the position and the EDC is anticipated. Leslie Valiant, City Administrator and Obregon will be invited to a BRE/R Committee meeting for further discussion.

[Backman was excused from the meeting.]

Meeting date and time. Future BRE/R Committee meetings will be held at 1:00 p.m.-2:00 p.m. on the second Wednesday in March, June, September and December.

Election of Officers.

IT WAS MOVED BY Roger Imdieke, SECONDED BY Steve Gardner, to re-elect Jim Ellingson as Chairperson and Sam Bowen as Vice Chairperson of the Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission Business Retention and Expansion/Recruitment Committee. MOTION CARRIED.

REPORTS—

Family Promise. Vosika reported Family Promise is opening a new 10-bed homeless shelter with additional apartments in downtown Willmar. The new facility is located near Camilla Tattoo across from the Food Shelf. Family Promise currently serves 3 to 4 families at a time, and with the new facility it has capacity to serve 10-12 families with temporary shelter of approximately 90 days. Single moms are the main demographic. Family Promise partners with Safe Avenues and United Community Action Partnership.

Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities. Swedburg reported the Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference will be held in New London on September 14-15, 2023. Details will be discussed at the June BRE/R Committee meeting. It will be a good opportunity to showcase the businesses in New London.

ADJOURNMENT—There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at approximately 12:05 p.m.

NEXT MEETING—The next committee meeting is **1:00 p.m., Wednesday, June 14, 2023** at the EDC Boardroom and via ZOOM video conference.