

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

**MINUTES**

**December 13, 2023**

**EDC Boardroom and Via ZOOM Video Conference**

- Present: Corky Berg, Sam Bowen, Jim Ellingson, Steve Gardner, Jennifer Mendoza (via Zoom), Kelsey Vosika and Mary Warszynski
- Excused: Samantha Crow, Les Heitke and Bridget Paulson
- Staff: Aaron Backman, Executive Director, Kelsey Olson, Marketing and Communications Specialist (via Zoom) and Tanna Stucky, Community Childcare Coordinator
- Secretarial: Cathy Skindelien, Legal & Administrative Assistants, Inc.

Chair Jim Ellingson called the meeting to order at approximately 1:05 p.m.

**AGENDA—**

IT WAS MOVED BY Corky Berg, SECONDED BY Sam Bowen, to approve the Agenda as emailed.  
MOTION CARRIED.

**MINUTES—**

IT WAS MOVED BY Kelsey Vosika, SECONDED BY Mary Warszynski, to approve the Minutes of the September 13, 2023 meeting as emailed. MOTION CARRIED.

Tanna Stucky introduced herself and self-introductions were conducted by committee members.

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS—**

**West Central Minnesota Area Job Fair.** Aaron Backman reported the West Central Minnesota Area Job Fair was held on September 28, 2023 at Ridgewater College. While there was good demand from businesses and employers, job seeker attendance was disappointing. Approximately 100 job seekers were present, down from the usual attendance of 200-300. Even though unemployment is up, the labor market is tight and the job seeker pool is limited. The pandemic changed patterns of job seeking, making candidates accustomed to applying for jobs on line. More students at Ridgewater College are studying remotely, resulting in fewer students on campus to attend the fair. Mary Warszynski reported at Employment Plus 90% of the time is spent recruiting job seekers. Wages have gone up faster than any other decade from her perspective. Many employers have downgraded minimum qualifications, with many dropping the four-year degree requirement. Background checks have decreased.

**Elevate Community Business Academy Update.** Backman reported the fifth class series is wrapping up. Graduation for 13 students will be held on Friday, December 15, 2023 at the Student Service Building of Ridgewater College. Rupa Mohan from Rising Tide Capital in New Jersey will be the keynote speaker.

**Ridgewater College Commercial Driver's License (CDL) Grant Update/Next Steps.** Bowen reported the final language for the CDL Grant contract has been agreed upon by the attorneys and a draft will be sent to the college from the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). The Request for Proposal is ready to be submitted to the design firm as soon as the contract is received. Bowen anticipates the project will be completed in one year.

#### **NEW BUSINESS—**

**EDC Rebranding.** Backman reported rebranding the EDC has been a topic with healthy discussions. The EDC Joint Powers Board approved Kandiyohi County Economic Development as the new marketing name of the organization. Greenwater Garage in New London developed approximately two dozen logo designs. The EDC Marketing Committee chose two primary logos that are flexible and have a horizontal or vertical option. These will be presented for approval by the EDC Joint Operations Board tomorrow.

#### **REPORTS—**

**Childcare Grant Update.** Backman reported the EDC has expended \$396,000 for childcare funding. Forgivable loans were extended to 26 existing family childcare providers, 8 new providers and 7 daycare centers. The maximum loan amount was \$12,500 for home providers and \$40,000 for daycare centers. The focus was on health and safety as well as adding capacity, and 263 new slots are slated to be created. Loans will be forgiven if the provider is still functioning after three years. DEED provided \$200,000 of the funding, which needs to be spent in 2023. Eighty percent of that funding has gone to forgivable loans. Leveraged funds include \$150,000 from Kandiyohi County, \$100,000 from the City of Willmar, and \$30,000 from First Children's Finance. Kelsey Olson has worked with several potential childcare centers outside of Willmar, including Peace Lutheran in New London, Prairie Woods Environmental Learning Center, which plans to open a "green" preschool, and Atwater Ford, which plans to create a multigenerational facility, including a childcare center and senior living space.

**Shared UCAP Childcare Position.** Stucky reported the Childcare Mentorship Program has eight mentors and eight mentees participating. A meeting was held for code of ethics and data privacy training. The mentors are providers with over 20 years of experience, who will be matched with mentees who have been in childcare five years or less. A meet and greet will take place on December 18<sup>th</sup> at the Willmar Conference Center. Participants in the program are from across the entire county, including New London, Raymond, Pennock and Willmar.

**Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio (CLUES).** Jennifer Mendoza reported she is working on recruiting for 2024. The CDL program has been going well, with two from the last class getting licensed and a few more working on it. CLUES received a \$10,000 donation from Bremer Bank. Mendoza plans to invest in the computers that were given to the community to make sure they are being used. This will keep Mendoza connected to the community as she re-engages with them. Other activities include community outreach with monthly community interactions to discuss what CLUES has to offer and extend a platform for other organizations to promote their services. A 32-hour online steam boiler technician course will be added in 2024. Mendoza will organize interactions between boiler operators and the companies that hire them. She recently received a promotion and will work more closely with the CLUES office in Austin. Cooking classes will be done in conjunction with the University of Minnesota. Mendoza is sharing information with the

community regarding the Greater Minnesota Housing Fund's Isaiah Program, which is made to help minority and low-income citizens enter housing careers to encourage more affordable housing.

**Kandiyohi County and Housing Redevelopment Authority (HRA).** Steve Gardner reported there are some twin home or 4-plex projects that may be able to get off the ground next year pending an RFP from the state of Minnesota. HRA manages approximately 550 units. HRA needs to hire an administrative person and a maintenance manager. Three million dollars was invested in the high-rise facility for windows, structural issues and electrical panel upgrades. Backman and Gardner participated in a hot topic discussion with the League of Women Voters, where housing was discussed. Housing projects underway include the Lakeland project of Unique Opportunities, and Preserve on 24<sup>th</sup> for a total of 272 new units.

**Other.** Bowen reported a regional career exploration event is planned for mid- to late-April, similar to Ridgewater College in Hutchinson's IGNITE Your Future program. High school sophomores come to campus and meet with businesses to do hands-on activities to give them an idea of what the career field entails.

Ridgewater College's Customized Training and Continuing Education added another position with the goal of developing, launching and building enrollment in nontraditional mechanisms for training entry-level skill trade workers. Short-term industry certifications will be offered in entry level construction, heating, ventilation and air conditioning, and low voltage technicians. Welding, soldering and heavy equipment operation will be added in the future. The key is to have an industry-recognized certification upon completion of the course. Businesses can contract with the school to get potential employees trained in these fields. One roadblock is the lack of financial aid for the student when credits aren't earned. Ridgewater will partner with Central Minnesota Jobs & Training, which will apply for a DEED grant to fund the first round of training programs.

Kelsey Vosika reported Family Promise's new homeless facility has opened and is running well, with two new employees hired. Many families are coming in for help due to the shortage of housing and daycare in the area. Church volunteers working with the families rotate on a yearly schedule. There are nine family units. There is a side location where community groups can come in and work with the families. There is a large demand and people are denied every day, due to unit availability and background checks. Eighty-seven percent of the parents of homeless families are working full-time jobs that don't pay well enough to afford housing. Some are young people who have been evicted and can't overcome it. Wages aren't going up enough to cover inflation and rising daycare costs. Many individuals have four-year college degrees but can't make ends meet. The average stay at the shelter is three to five months. The shelter focuses on the family's needs rather than a strict timeframe, as there is too much recurrence if they leave too early. Stays have ranged from two weeks to a full year. Housing needs to become available for the most vulnerable citizens. Shelters save lives, but housing ends homelessness.

**ADJOURNMENT**—There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at approximately 2:21 p.m.

**NEXT MEETING**—The next committee meeting is **1:00 p.m., Wednesday, March 13, 2024** at the EDC Boardroom and via ZOOM video conference.