

KANDIYOHI COUNTY AND CITY OF WILLMAR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION (EDC)
AGRICULTURE AND RENEWABLE ENERGY DEVELOPMENT (AG) COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES
February 17, 2022
EDC Board Room, Willmar and Via Zoom Video Conference

Present: Rollie Boll, Kevin Halvorson, Dan Lippert, Keith Poier, Chris Radel and Nate Reuss
Excused: Kim Larson, Dustin Kotrba and Dan Tepfer
Absent: Abdullahi Awale and Larry Konsterlie
Guests: Nate Erickson and Ben Larson
Staff: Sarah Swedburg, Business Development Manager
Secretarial: Nancy Birkeland, Legal & Administrative Assistants, Inc.

Chairperson Kevin Halvorson called the meeting to order at approximately 7:31 a.m.

AGENDA—

IT WAS MOVED BY Keith Poier, SECONDED BY Chris Radel, to approve the Agenda as emailed. MOTION CARRIED.

MINUTES—

IT WAS MOVED BY Chris Radel, SECONDED BY Nate Reuss, to approve the minutes of the December 16, 2021 meeting as emailed. MOTION CARRIED.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS—There was no unfinished business.

NEW BUSINESS—

MNyou Youth Garden. Nate Erickson provided his background, including that he works with University of Minnesota (U of M) Extension and its 4-H program, in addition to being a part-time manager of MNyou. Ben Larson is an instructor at Ridgewater College in addition to working with MNyou. Erickson stated in 2016 they both agreed to starting MNyou, even though neither had any experience in gardening and they wanted it to be a program for the diverse population in Kandiyohi County. MNyou has 60 to 90 beds in rotation. All beds have 9" pathways to maximize space and have both drip and overhead irrigation. They tried to grow exotic vegetables, but it did not go over well. MNyou is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), a cropsharing system for consumers, with weekly distributions. For every CSA share sold by MNyou, one is donated at no charge to a community member in financial hardship. Each box includes recipes on how to use the vegetables. A full share is 40-50 pounds of vegetables per week for 18 weeks. A half share is the same size, but is delivered every other week. MNyou can do about 64 shares per acre. There are other CSAs in the region that are similarly priced.

They were thankful to receive a pandemic grant from the EDC, as well as grants from the Bernick's Family Foundation and BlueCross BlueShield, which helped them build a greenhouse to grow vegetables year round. A winter CSA was started last year and goes from December to March with weekly or bi-weekly distributions of greens and microgreens. In addition to the previous grants mentioned, they have also received grants from the Willmar Community Foundation, United Way, Vision 2040 and a local woman, who donates to them every year. They are trying to access programs through the United States Department of Agriculture and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

They are exploring an on-farm market and are looking at starting a farmers market at Robbins Island this summer, hopefully starting in June. They have helped with other community gardens and are working with Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services and the U of M to build a tiny mobile market (6' trailer) to take to apartment complexes and mobile home parks following the path of the GrowMobile; they teach about vegetables and handout a token to purchase products. They just started doing food preservation and purchased a stove for canning. A part of addressing food security is also addressing waste so they deliver extra vegetables each week to Hope for Our City and the Willmar Food Shelf. Those who receive vegetables work in the garden. They hire up to 30 youth from the community; many are from the Karen and Somali communities plus others who show up. Every Wednesday the DREAM Academy brings a busload of students. They also have West Central Industries youth through its transition services. They are training them to do small-scale farming. Many families they work with live in apartments and do not have access at their homes to do gardening. Many children return year-after-year and bring younger siblings along. Approximately six youth who worked in the gardens have decided to go into the agriculture field.

Erickson stated he was a butcher for 15 years working with his dad, who owned a meat locker; he is interested in getting back into that field. Amin Grocery in downtown Willmar purchases his goat meat from Egypt. The lady who donates to them has offered the use of her property to raise goats, but the cost is not affordable and there are other difficulties. They need to explore regulations and have been interacting with the new meat cutting program at Ridgewater College. Ideally, they need land with access to electricity and water and a building nearby that could be used for processing.

Keith Poier stated the University of Oregon has a similar program and is trying to do a solar greenhouse. MNyou has done some research on solar, but the startup costs are high. It was suggested the Ag Committee could help with finding land for youth to start a garden of their own. Erickson and Larson felt it would be great to have youth tour some local farms and learn more about farming. The youth need connections to possibly do internships. Dan Lippert noted there are opportunities for farmers to put land into pollinators and other uses. MNyou gardens are located north of Sun Ray Square on Horseshoe Drive. The shared garden is behind Giovanni's in Dana Heights.

[Erickson and Larson were excused from the meeting.]

It was recommended MNyou give this committee a report each year on how they are doing. Erickson and Larson are going to give Sarah Swedburg the names of their contacts with the U of M Morris as to land access. It was questioned how this committee can we facilitate younger people getting access to farming and transitioning to the next generation—mentorship.

Election of 2022 Officers.

IT WAS MOVED BY Keith Poier, SECONDED BY Dan Lippert, to re-elect Kevin Halvorson as chair and Dustin Kotrba as vice chair of the Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission's Agriculture and Renewable Energy Development Committee for 2022. MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

REPORTS

Industrial Hemp Exploratory Subcommittee. Poier reported the subcommittee met on Monday where it discussed Tim Seehusen's Prairie PROducers, which is still working on getting financing. The bank and Renville County is assisting them. Poier and Kim Larson will be attending the NoCo Hemp Expo in Denver, Colorado, the largest hemp conference in the United States on March 23-25. The subcommittee discussed Heartland Industries, which is trying to develop a biodegradable plastic from hemp. Swedburg obtained some contacts through Community Venture Network. The subcommittee recently joined the Minnesota Industrial Hemp Association. Swedburg noted the subcommittee is seeking new members and provided those who currently serve on the subcommittee. Bob Meyerson recently resigned from the subcommittee.

IT WAS MOVED BY Chris Radel, SECONDED BY Keith Poier, to accept, with regret, the resignation of Bob Meyerson from the Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission's Industrial Hemp Exploratory Subcommittee. MOTION CARRIED.

Swedburg reported the New London Food Coop is moving forward. It is seeking funding to complete remodeling of a building in New London. It is also seeking new members. It was suggested representatives of the Coop be invited to a committee meeting after it is further along.

Swedburg announced the Willmar Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce Agri-Business Committee is hosting a tour of Marcus Construction next week.

ADJOURNMENT—There being no further business,

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

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 9:01 a.m.

NEXT MEETING—The next meeting is 7:30 a.m., Thursday, March 17, 2022 at the EDC Board Room and via ZOOM video conference.