

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

**MINUTES**

**November 22, 2021**

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

Present: Donna Boonstra, Jesse Gislason, Emily Lien, Pam Rosenau and Brittany VanDerBill

Absent: Elizabeth Dyrdal

Excused: Melissa Knott

Staff: Aaron Backman, Executive Director; Sarah Swedburg, Business Development Manager and Kelsey Olson, Marketing and Communications Specialist

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

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

**AGENDA**—There were no changes to the agenda.

**MINUTES**—

IT WAS MOVED BY Brittany VanDerBill, SECONDED BY Pam Rosenau to approve the Minutes of the October 25, 2021 meeting as emailed. MOTION CARRIED.

**SOCIAL MEDIA STATISTICS**—

**Facebook Statistics.** Aaron Backman reported the following Facebook statistics from October 21 to November 17, 2021: Total page likes 805, new page likes 6 (^20%), post reach 2285 (although post reach was down 24% compared to last month, it was 50% higher than June), page views 68 (^79%), post engagement 311 (v17%), new page followers 5 and total page followers 942. While the usual ratio of men to women followers is 60%-40%, this month 72% of the followers were women. Willmar had the largest number of followers, followed by New London and Spicer. There were followers from several foreign countries, including Singapore, Lebanon and the Philippines. Top posts were as follows:

1. Halal-certified meats. The Mid-Minnesota Development Commission is working to localize goat meat production. Goats will be raised in Kandiyohi County, processed in Swift County and then sold at three Somali-owned stores in Willmar.
2. October is Manufacturing Month. In recognition of Manufacturing Month, Nova-Tech Engineering LLC is hosting in-person tours of its location at MinnWest Technology Campus.
3. Block 25 Lofts. The tax increment financing district for the Block 25 Lofts apartment project in downtown Willmar was approved by the Willmar City Council.

4. Senator Tina Smith tour of DI Labs. DI Labs hosted a facility tour organized by Sarah Swedburg, Business Development Manager at the EDC. Senator Smith toured the facility and participated in a roundtable discussion about broadband expansion in Kandiyohi County.

LinkedIn had 26 pageviews, mainly from people in business development and operations. Cyber security was the subject of the top Tweet, followed by the DI Labs tour. The website had 1312 users, including 1277 new users, and a bounce rate of 82%.

**INTRODUCTION OF KELSEY OLSON, MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST**—Backman introduced Kelsey Olson, who started officially working on November 16, 2021. Introductions were made. Olson described her career background at Sibley State Park and a few of her special projects, including Turtle Tuesday and the New London Oral History Project. Working for the EDC will give her an opportunity to use her marketing skills, provide service to the community and develop outreach, particularly with Native Americans.

#### **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**—

**Broadband Project.** Swedburg reported the Broadband and Advanced Technology Committee is waiting for news on the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) grant, which is scheduled to be awarded on or near November 29, 2021. Additional funds should become available from the \$65 billion infrastructure bill signed by President Joe Biden. The City of Prinsburg has approved bonding for its broadband project and Arvig will begin construction next year. It has sufficient supplies in stock and expects completion by the end of the year. Prinsburg held a community meeting and had good support for the project. One citizen planned to move out of Prinsburg because of the lack of internet access, but the project has convinced him to stay.

The NTIA grant will affect the following seven townships in Kandiyohi County: Dovre, Mamre, Arctander, St. Johns, Colfax, Norway Lake and Lake Andrew. If the NTIA grant is not awarded, the state Border-to-Border Development Grant would be used for Dovre, Mamre, Arctander and St. Johns townships. Dovre Township held a meeting to set up a subordinated district, the tool they will use to fund its portion of the project. There was no opposition to approval. The next step will be formal approval in December, however, it will not be needed if the NTIA grant is awarded to Kandiyohi County. The other three townships held initial supervisor meetings to prepare in case a Border-to-Border grant becomes necessary to complete their projects, which would be done the following year. Each township was asked to appoint one person as a point of contact. Supervisors from Dovre, Mamre, Arctander and St. Johns were in attendance to answer questions and give feedback. The townships have evolved in their thinking. It was an uphill climb convincing them to invest in broadband, but since the pandemic experience they are all in favor of moving these projects forward.

Strategizing has begun for the next grant opportunity, a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) grant from the ReConnect Loan and Grant Program, which will be open November 29, 2021 through February 2022. Charter added one small project adjacent to its previous project. Connie Schmoll's contract will expire at the end of January and a three-month extension has been discussed. Swedburg commented that broadband education is extremely important. Some townships have a newsletter with a broadband section and the EDC could pick a topic and feed that

content to the townships for their newsletters. Rosenau is willing to help with broadband and cybersecurity information and offered to speak at live presentations if necessary. The *Blandin Broadband Blog* posted an article about a study done by Purdue in Indiana which documents that each dollar invested in broadband creates at least a \$4 return. The broadband question comes up quickly when recruiting workforce. There was a workforce meeting with Larry Lundblad, former interim president of Minnesota State College Southeast. Half of the attendees were from Ridgewater and half from businesses and non-profits. One of the local lenders stated that before the pandemic 15% of their workforce worked remotely, during the pandemic it increased to 70% and has now levelled out at 50%. This change appears to be long-term.

**Elevate Business Academy-Small Business Partnership Grant.** Swedburg reported the EDC received notification of approval of a \$76,000 state grant to fund the Elevate Business Academy program. Elevate was also awarded a state-wide MAPCED Award for an outstanding economic development program. The award will be accepted at the Association of Minnesota Counties Annual Conference on December 7<sup>th</sup> in Bloomington. Attendees will be Swedburg, Backman and Olson from the EDC, Scott Marquardt from Southwest Initiative Foundation (SWIF), Abdusalaam Hirsi, co-instructor, possibly an Elevate graduate(s); and Rupa Mohan, Education and Training Lead, and Chris Breitenberg, Director of National Program Partnerships from Rising Tide Capital. The award should help facilitate future funding from local partners. Seven students are on track to graduate from the second session of Elevate. Graduation will be December 17<sup>th</sup> at the Willmar Education and Arts Center (WEAC). Invitations will be sent out to the EDC Joint Operations Board, the graduates, their families and other local partners.

**Fall/Winter Newsletter Discussion.** Backman reported dirt work has begun on the \$26 million, 218,000 square foot logistics project. This is an example of information that could be used in a newsletter. The EDC published newsletters several years ago and now that Olson is on board, would like to reintroduce it. VanDerBill suggested going with current format to get started. The first edition should include an introduction of Olson. The Elevate program is another possible topic, along with housing projects in the area. The newsletter will be done on a quarterly basis. If something significant occurs in between newsletters a special announcement will be made. Snippets from township newsletters will be used to help reach the rural areas. Olson commented that once there is a consistent outline available it is just a matter of filling in new information. Lien suggested starting with quarterly and moving to every other month if there is enough new information available. Jesse Gislason suggested since there is still the website for information, a quarterly newsletter should be sufficient. The newsletter will start out as digital with hard copies as a future option. The email list will need to be updated. Digital copies will give the EDC an opportunity to track clicks on links and link to additional articles.

## **NEW BUSINESS—**

Backman reported a Workforce Solutions Summit is scheduled for January 20, 2022. Partners for the event include Sam Bowen, Customized Training and Continuing Education at Ridgewater College; Bridget Paulson, Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services, Inc. (CMJTS); Eric Day, Mid-Minnesota Development Commission (MMDC); and the Willmar Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce. The idea is to share information and have small group discussions with businesses. Mike Henke, owner of Mike Henke Inc. from Doniphan, Nebraska will speak about workforce trends. Luke Greiner from Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) will present information on regional and local trends. Scott Marquardt from SWIF will facilitate. There will be

several PowerPoint presentations from 1:00-4:00 p.m. with a social event afterwards. Promotional flyers will be needed. The total budget will be about \$4000, with SWIF contributing \$2500. This event will be smaller than Partners in Ag; ideally 80 people will be in attendance. Business owners will be the target audience, as well as partners in workforce training and Human Resource Directors.

The Community Venture Network (CVN) regional site selector meeting will be held on December 3. The EDC has partnered with MinnWest Technology Campus for membership in CVN, which connects businesses and developers looking to expand in greater Minnesota to cities in that area. MinnWest Technology Campus is currently working with a few prospects introduced to them at previous CVN meetings. A prospective child-care provider and a food manufacturer have requested follow-up information from the last CVN meeting. This is a great opportunity to meet developers, many of whom are located in Minneapolis. Kandiyohi County has a fairly good mix of undeveloped sites and existing facilities available.

St. Paul has passed the most restrictive rent control in the United States. Backman believes this will have a detrimental impact for rental housing developers in that area. Eighty percent of economists say this is a bad policy with unintended consequences. The 3% cap doesn't allow for inflation and it covers new construction. Ryan Companies pulled its project of 800 units because the increased risk makes getting financing more difficult. This is the opposite impact of what was intended. Developers could be encouraged to look to rural areas as an alternative.

**NEXT MEETING**—The next meeting is **12 noon, Monday, December 27, 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 12:59 p.m.