

White County Development Authority
CALLED MEETING MINUTES

DATE: Tuesday, November 16th, 2021

PLACE: BOC Board Room
1235 Helen Highway
Cleveland, GA, 30528

TIME: 10:00 AM

Those present were Michael Meuse, John Ziemer, Michael Yarbrough, Ridley Kinsey, and Joe Whelchel. Guests present were Carl Free, John Sell, Joey Cason County Manager, Mercedes Dodd, Dean Dyer of WRWH Radio, Ryan Thompson and Jason Perry of Thomas & Hutton, Lynn Patterson of Three Points Planning, and Andy Camp and Tony Catchot of LeCraw Engineering.

Acting Chairman Michael Meuse called the meeting to order.

Ms. Lynn Patterson of Three Points Planning gave an introduction of the presentation for the process of the strategic plan, including asking the members of Thomas & Hutton and LeCraw Engineering to provide a brief introduction of themselves and their qualifications. Ms. Patterson said their position is to be as comprehensive as possible within a reasonable timeframe and budget.

Ms. Patterson gave an overview of what would be involved in the strategic plan, including locations, vacant/deteriorating buildings, infrastructure placement, workforce development opportunities, residential development, housing analysis, greenspace analysis, policies and opportunities, incentives, public-private partnerships, marketing, target industries, and community engagement. She projected a timeline following the kickoff meeting as gathering information, such as community input from stakeholders, in January and February, a draft plan in April, and a possible final report by July of 2022. Mr. Sell stated that the projected completion submitted to the ARC for the grant was December of 2022.

In response to Ms. Patterson's request for keywords for what the board would like to see for White County, Mr. Kinsey stated he would like to see "smart growth." He indicated that he did not want White County to be a small Atlanta, but he suggested being able to blend the old with the new. He also wanted to address the possibility of higher density housing for workers.

Chairman Meuse explained that entrepreneurship is an important part of the county and he would like to foster positive change, but believes there may be resistance against change.

Mr. Ziemer noted the importance of history in the county, especially with infrastructure capability with housing and the competition of short-term rentals. Mr. Ziemer spoke to the history of the city of Helen regarding policies, such as liquor laws, and how policies change with administration and community.

Mr. Yarbrough pointed out how the previous survey completed had a consensus of people wanting to maintain the beauty of the county, but a recent nuisance ordinance brought out major opposition, so he wants to find a way to preserve the beauty of the county without "stepping on toes" such as making downtown Cleveland more business friendly.

White County Development Authority
CALLED MEETING MINUTES

Mr. Welchel said he thinks there needs to be a focus on better paying job opportunities for middle aged couples with children growing up to decide if they want to stay in the county or move elsewhere that has better job opportunities. He explained there are mainly three organizations that provide substance for good paying jobs and are followed by many rural based small businesses that tend to have small pay scales, which leaves a “white space” that many people would be willing to fill so they could continue to live in White County.

Mr. Yarbrough explained that the Chamber of Commerce works with the school system to help connect students to the technical industry. Mr. Sell added that there is a CTAE program and one of the better welding programs that supplies local welding shops and Kubota. Mr. Sell stated that the school system is strong with roughly a 96 percent graduation rate.

In addressing the question of whether teachers reside locally or out of county, Mr. Meuse stated that there is a one-acre minimum lot size that limits multi-family housing, such as townhomes, for workers. He added that there are many retirees that would love to live here but are unable to afford it, which he thinks that higher density housing may help to alleviate and relates back to lack of water and sewer infrastructure. Mr. Yarbrough stated that apartments may not be supported, but townhomes might be more realistic. Mr. Camp explained the unique megatrend in housing of a greater desire to be a renter. Mr. Kinsey pointed out how revitalizing downtown areas help to bring graduates back to their home cities.

Mr. Perry inquired where most college students attend school, to which Mr. Sell said the majority go to the University of North Georgia at the Gainesville or Dahlonega campuses and Truett McConnell College. Speaking to housing density, Mr. Sell added that the RV parks have large amounts of permanent residences. In response to being asked where high density housing may be more accepted, Mr. Ziemer explained that Highway 129 and Highway 75 have greater sewer and water possibilities and Chairman Meuse agreed that focusing on the main business and tourist lanes would be the best option. Mr. Cason and Mr. Sell explained the current annexation policies for the cities and county, adding that the City of Cleveland requires annexation for sewer capabilities with the exception of the Industrial Park and that the county is opposed to spoke annexation. Mr. Perry explained that “smart growth” has been a hard term to define, but it can be tailored to the community through the different projects for high density housing or downtown revitalization to bring back children that went away to college or for better paying jobs. Mr. Sell further explained with the one-acre minimums, there is a one dwelling per tract requirement but a variance process for a second dwelling that has predominantly been for family. Career mobility and providing for the middle population were discussed as important factors to look at.

Mr. Cason detailed that SPLOST funds were 30 percent higher than originally projected, with influx revenue mostly coming out of Helen, adding that projects like road improvements are being discussed for those funds. Short term rentals and RV parks were discussed in regard to tax collection and ordinances, as well as the increased popularity of RV parks for permanent living and multi-generation living. Possible opportunities like the wineries and the sale of the hardware store in downtown Cleveland were discussed. Mr. Sell noted the obstacles of one four-lane road that goes from Highway 75 to Highway 129 around the City of Cleveland and the lack of rail systems, although Duncan Bridge connects to the future inland port on Highway 365.

White County Development Authority
CALLED MEETING MINUTES

Ms. Patterson expressed her gratitude for the board's time and said she will be establishing regular check in meetings for updates.

Chairman Meuse opened the discussion for election of officers. Mr. Ziemer nominated Mr. Yarbrough for Chairman and was seconded by Mr. Meuse. Motion was unanimous. Mr. Yarbrough nominated Mr. Meuse and Mr. Ziemer to continue in their current roles of Vice Chairman and Secretary and was seconded by Mr. Kinsey. Motion was unanimous.

Chairman Meuse made a motion to adjourn and was seconded by Mr. Ziemer. The meeting was adjourned.