

Laurens County Development Corporation

Board Meeting – Minutes

Monday – November 18, 2024

Attendees:

Shawn Bell, Jimmy Capps, Jim Donahoo, Jeff Field (Justin Benfield's proxy), Thomas Higgs (Brown Patterson's proxy), Mayor Stellartean Jones, Dr. Hope Rivers, virtual (Amanda Benfield's proxy), Dr. Jody Penland, David Tribble, Steve West

Guests:

Wes Meetze – Laurens County, Melissa Ferqueron – Laurens County

Staff:

Jon Coleman, Lynn Finley, Whitney Lagrange

Press:

None

Chairman West called the meeting to order at 12:05.

Minutes and Financials

Chairman West asked the Board for a motion to approve the meeting's agenda. Jim Donahoo made the motion to approve the agenda and Shawn Bell seconded the motion. The Board unanimously approved the agenda.

Chairman West asked the Board for a motion to approve the minutes from the 09/17/24 meeting. Jimmy Capps made the motion to approve the minutes as presented and Mayor Stellartean Jones seconded the motion. The Board unanimously approved the minutes.

Lynn Finley provided a recap of expenses for September and October 2024. The financials were accepted as information only.

Existing Industry Update – Lynn Finley

* Lynn Finley reported that there has been a recent closing announcement from Rich Products in Fountain Inn and the company notified employees last Wednesday. The plant manager shared that Rich's has 6 pizza plants and none are at capacity, so this decision is a consolidation effort. The closure date is planned for January 31, and it is impacting 220 to 225 employees. A few will be staying on until June to close the facility down. Lynn has contacted Rapid Response for assistance and to get the process in motion for that agency and SC Works to support these impacted employees. All this has been communicated with local management and LCDC will assist in coordinating a hiring event or with whatever they request.

* It was shared that the Laurens County unemployment rate was last reported for September at 4.7% (down from 5.2% in July) compared to the state rate of 4.5% which is up from 3.9% as reported for July. The state labor participation rate inched up to 57.6%. (www.dew.sc.gov)

* In mid-October there was an incident involving West Fraser in Joanna that was covered on the Upstate news. With the type of work they do with wood a spark ignited causing a fire. The company reported that no one was badly injured, and no significant damage was caused to the facility.

* We are glad to report that another 8th grade Career Showcase was held in November. There were approximately 1,000 students to come through the event. Twenty-two entities showcased their different career options and many volunteers from multiple organizations participated.

* Whitney and Lynn attended the SCEDA Mid-Year meeting in October which was hosted in Greenville.

* The industry wage survey has wrapped up and results communicated to everyone in early October. There were 20 companies to participate this year which included data for 4,036 employees in Laurens County.

* For an update on Nordson. ReadySC has shared that the company is close to filling all open positions. They are in the 2nd group of training now and new hires are waiting to report for their 2 weeks of training. They are on track to complete by mid-January.

Marketing Update – Whitney Laqrangle

* The career showcase was a big hit. Whitney ran the website with all the resources and the photos. She is currently working through getting photos cropped and edited so they'll be on the website soon. If you want to visit the website and check those out, the address is www.lcncshowcase.com.

* The recently held Stew and Brew was a great success. Like last year we had around 55 community and industry leaders and business development partners attend. A match donation was announced to assist the Clinton fire fund in rebuilding as needs are identified and established.

* LCDC has partnered with Go Laurens for advertising and highlight articles on LCDC. The goal is to provide the community with more insight into what we do and to keep LCDC in the forefront. The contract includes 30,000 impressions per month on Go Laurens, Go Clinton and Go Fountain Inn.

* Whitney recently attended the Upstate Alliance's quarterly research meeting. She attends those to get the latest information on answering RFIs, data points, resources and tools. In addition to exploring the various online data tools and new best practices, information is provided on broader trends that have been recently discussed. As noted in the last board meeting, RFI numbers have been lower this year. But it appears that this trend is shared by other county and city representatives as well. A particularly interesting point raised by Upstate Alliance research staff is that companies and site consultants are now independently utilizing all these new programs and tools as well. This shift allows consultants to narrow their focus ahead of time and to be more selective from the outset. Even before they send a request to the state and regional alliances. So essentially, they're becoming more targeted from the beginning.

* There is a printed invitation in each board packet for the upcoming LCDC Holiday Drop In. Board members should have also received it as email. It's going to be Wednesday, December 4th at Tap and Table at Harper Commons. Please kick off the season with us with some good food, beverages, live music and networking.

*The annual meeting is planned for January 21st.

Economic Development Activity – Jonathan Coleman

*So far this year, LCDC has received 55 RFIs. At this time last year, it was 73. Of those 55, we did not have any type of product to submit for 20. And of those 20, except for two, they were looking for an existing building with specs that we do not have. Anywhere from 50,000 to 200,000 square foot. With the other two, one was looking for 400 megawatts of electricity and over a million gallons of water a day, and the other one needed 1.8 million square feet with runway access.

*Since our last meeting, we have had five prospect site visits to the county. One was about five days after the hurricane. To expand on Whitney's report the RFIs we are seeing are resulting in probably a higher percentage of actual prospects visiting the county because Laurens County has already made the first cut, if not the second cut, before we even hear from them.

* Later this week the developers that built the new spec building in Hunter Industrial Park are hosting an open house. They invited site consultants, commercial real estate brokers, staff from commerce and others for an open house type event for tours and to be made aware of what is there and what it can house.

* Jonathan will be attending the Area Development magazine's fall consultant forum later this month. They have over 30 site consultants participating, so it'll be a good group there to promote Laurens County.

* On November 4th, SC Secretary Harry Lightsey visited the county and spent half a day here with us. There was very good discussion about the local needs as well as a tour of the county.

*The SC Department of Commerce has announced a new site readiness initiative. Jonathan has a call with that team later this week to discuss Laurens County's list of initiatives we would like their assistance with and to prioritize the need.

* We would like to publicly thank all our utility partners, Duke Energy, Laurens Electric, the County, the cities - basically everybody in this room, for all their hard work in the aftermath of the hurricane. That was something none of us have ever seen before here and hope to never see again. But our community came together and we made it through. We appreciate everybody's hard work during those hard weeks.

2025 Budget Approval – Jeff Field, Treasurer

* The Finance Committee met on October 22nd with Jon and Lynn to go over the draft budget. That committee is made up of Jeff Field, Brown Patterson, and Shawn Bell. There is not a huge change in the budget from last year – an overall increase of 2.6%. We do have a 4% cost of living increase in this year's budget. Other items to point out: Contract labor decreased and that is associated with the change of the LCDC attorney. There is an increase in insurance as well due to an increase in property insurance because of having more assets that need to be covered. After a time of discussion Chairman West stated that coming as approved from the Finance Committee no motion is necessary and called for a vote. The 2025 proposed budget passed unanimously.

Nominating Committee Report and Approval of Officers – Hope Rivers, LCDC Nominating Committee

* The nominating committee appointed by Chairman West met on November 5th. The committee consists of Justin Benfield, Amanda Benfield and Dr. Hope Rivers. The committee discussed the officer slate for 2025 - 2026 and bring forward the following names: For Chairperson, Brown Patterson; for Vice-Chairperson, Shawn Bell; for Secretary, Jeff Field; for Treasurer Jim Donahoo; for Immediate Past-Chair, that would be the current chairman, which is Steve West. Chairman West asked for any discussion. Coming from committee no motion is necessary, and Chairman West called for a vote. The proposed slate of officers was unanimously approved.

Legal Update – Jonathan Coleman

* Several weeks ago LCDC received a letter from Sandy Cruickshanks resigning as LCDC's general counsel. He asked that his letter be read to the board and is as follows:

"Dear LCDC board, It is time for me to spend every remaining minute with my family, especially my grandchildren. Following the horrors of the fire and the latest storm, I took time to reflect and decide on where to go from here. It's time to attend volleyball matches, football games, family gatherings, long weekends at our lake place, concerts, travels to favorite venues, golf matches or just sit on the deck and listen to music. This board and its staff have successfully grown our county and strengthened existing industries. You should be applauded for your leadership. This will be effective December 31, 2024. It has been an honor to be a small part of this organization, and I sincerely thank each of you for the opportunity."

With that, the executive committee accepted a proposal from Brandon Norris of Burr Forman law firm in Greenville. Burr Forman is heavily involved in economic development legal work. Mr. Norris will serve as the organization's general counsel beginning January 2025.

A meeting has been planned with Mr. Cruickshanks and Mr. Norris to go over the transition.

Special Recognition – Jonathan Coleman

* Jonathan shared that this is the last board meeting with Steve West acting as Chairman. Staff presented Chairman West with a token of appreciation for his two years of service to the LCDC as Chairman.

Executive Session:

None

Other Business:

None

With no other reports the meeting was adjourned at 12:35 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Lynn S. Finley