

Minutes
Rural Virginia Action Committee Meeting
Board of Directors of the Virginia Economic Development Partnership
March 6, 2024
12:30 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.

One James Center, 9th Floor – Board Room
Richmond, Virginia

Welcome and Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 12:30 p.m. by Acting Chair Bill Hayter, who noted that a quorum was present.

In-person Committee members: Carrie Chenery, Mimi Coles, Stephen Edwards, Rick Harrel, John Hewa, Secretary Caren Merrick, and Bill Hayter (ex officio)

Committee members absent: Nancy Howell Agee and Nick Rush

Other in-person Board members: Pace Lochte, Will Sessoms, and Steven Stone

Public Comment Period

Acting Chair Hayter solicited public comments. There were none.

Approval of Minutes for December 6, 2023

Acting Chair Hayter requested approval of the December 6, 2023, meeting minutes. A motion was made by Mr. Edwards and seconded by Ms. Chenery, and the minutes were unanimously approved as presented.

Taskforce for Rural Virginia Economic Growth Update

Acting Chair Hayter introduced Abigail Wescott to provide an update on the Taskforce for Rural Virginia Economic Growth.

Ms. Wescott said the Taskforce met in December, 2023, and finalized a list of its top eight priorities from a larger group of possible priorities. Ms. Wescott reviewed the top priorities listed below.

Top Rural Taskforce Priorities

1. Educate/train local elected officials on economic development objectives
 - a. Training is needed due to a lot of turnovers at the local level
 - b. To help keep messaging aligned and consistent
 - c. With many new Legislators, this is an excellent opportunity to educate them on economic development.
2. Develop small sites as well as large sites
3. Increase housing supply while mitigating cost burdens for governments
 - a. Working on building action items for this priority
 - b. DCHD sits on this task force and is actively involved in conversations
4. Develop dedicated funding streams for all Rural Virginia
5. Ensure robust local and regional economic development staff capacity
6. Provide support for grant writing and management and developing a consolidated portal for state grants
7. Develop key rural infrastructure corridors (e.g., US 58, US 460)
8. Align local and regional strategies for target industries, site development, and workforce programs

Ms. Chenery noted that many of the priorities are not related to the core mission of VEDP. Mr. El Koubi said that the Taskforce does not envision that VEDP will lead all of the priorities, adding that hopefully there will be a natural leader of these priorities among the members of the Taskforce.

Mr. Harrell spoke about the importance of peer-to-peer influence and getting the localities that have been successful to encourage, educate, and set expectations with other regions.

Mr. Hayter spoke about the importance of getting private foundations involved in economic development initiatives.

Secretary Merrick highlighted the importance of rural Virginia, adding that the agencies in her Secretariat are highly engaged every day in rural areas. She noted that this month, the Virginia Innovation Partnership Corporation will be hosting its Board meeting in Martinsville, VA for the first time, just one example of an ongoing focus of expanding innovation in rural Virginia.

Ms. Wescott said that the Taskforce has suggested that VEDP lead several efforts to support rural economic development, which have been outlined below.

Economic development training for local elected officials

- Conduct educational sessions for local elected officials in coordination with partners

Technical support and capacity building for local and regional EDOs

- Increase local and regional EDO capacity through strategy support, benchmarking, and other technical assistance
- Adam Watkins suggested revisiting the Local and Regional Competitiveness Initiative (LRCI) survey to secure more recent data and enable communities to benchmark where they are today and establish priorities.

Support for federal grant applications

- Build state or regional expertise and capacity for writing, coordinating, and administering federal grants for rural communities

Next steps:

- VEDP will develop basic business plans of how it could accomplish these efforts, including staff and funding requirements.
- Details of the business plans for these programs will be included in VEDP's strategic plan

Mr. El Koubi asked the Committee for their overall reactions to the list of priorities and asked if they felt anything needed to be added or deleted. He asked the Committee and Board members to consider whether the Taskforce priorities that VEDP is best positioned to lead should be baked into VEDP's Operational Plan Major Initiatives, including dedicating capacity and resources to the initiatives. Acting Chair Bill Hayter agreed that this needs to be considered.

Ms. Chenery suggested adding the Virginia Institute for Economic Development to the Taskforce.

Mr. Edwards spoke about availability of federal grant money. He encouraged VEDP and the Taskforce to move fast on federal grant applications. He suggested that the Taskforce decide quickly who will provide support or they may risk missing the window to apply for grants.

Mr. El Koubi said that luckily VEDP is not starting from scratch, as VEDP's Economic Competitiveness division does some of this work, though only scratching the surface of what is out there. He said more resources will be needed to make significant progress.

Ms. Wescott reviewed the Taskforce's projected milestones, including action plans and creation of a business plan.

Topics and Discussion – 2024 Suggestions

Ms. Wescott asked for suggested topics for future meetings. She encouraged Committee members to reach out to her with topics they may want to highlight at future meetings.

Adjournment

Acting Chair Hayter summarized his takeaways from the meeting. There being no further business, he adjourned the meeting at 1:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,


Lesley Brown