

EAST BETHEL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY (EDA) MEETING
June 20, 2023

MEMBERS PRESENT: President Julie Lux, Mayor Kevin Lewis, Council Member Brian Mundle, Catherine Lancrain, Brian Bezanson, Suzanne Erkel.

MEMBERS ABSENT: Tom Schulzetenberg

ALSO PRESENT: Jack Davis, City Administrator

1.0 – Call to Order

President Lux called the regular meeting of the EDA to order at 7:00 pm.

2.0 – Adopt Agenda

Bezanson moved and Erkel seconded to approve the agenda as presented. Lux asked any discussion? To the motion, all in favor say aye. **All in favor.** Lux asked any opposed? That motion passes. **Motion passes unanimously.**

3.0 – Approval of Meeting Minutes

Bezanson moved and Erkel seconded to approve the May 15, 2023, meeting minutes as written. Lux asked any discussion? To the motion, all in favor say aye. **All in favor.** Lux asked any opposed? That motion passes. **Motion passes unanimously.**

4.0 – BR&E Program Update Discussion

Davis presented staff's report stating the East Bethel EDA has begun discussion for revisions to the current BR&E Program. As this program is seven years old, it may be time to review and update the plan to reflect the new challenges faced by small business in the post pandemic culture and the evolving business climate environment as it exists in 2023. The EDA is also interested in any ancillary programs that would complement and enhance the BR&E.

Davis indicated Christine Costello, our Community & Economic Development Representative for Connexus Energy, attended our April 17th EDA Meeting and reviewed the services Connexus provides through their economic development programs and discussed what they may be able to offer in the update of our BR&E Program.

Davis stated Michael Darger, with University of Minnesota Extension Service and one of the primary authors of the current BR&E Plan, met with the EDA at the May 15, 2023 meeting to provide a review of potential updates and/or direction to the plan.

Davis noted staff met with the East Bethel Chamber of Commerce at their May 11, 2023 and updated the Chamber on the on the EDA's initiative to revisit our current BR&E Program and requested their participation going forward with the BR&E update.

Davis stated at the May 15th EDA meeting, Mr. Darger offered several options to bring the current plan in line with the changes that have occurred in the business environment since 2016 and these included:

- the traditional BR&E approach which would follow the outline of the current plan
- a hybrid approach to the BR&E with data updates and a revised method of business visitations
- a variation of the BR&E (referenced in the meeting minutes in agenda item 3.0) referred as the Ohio State program.

Davis indicated the cost of the traditional BR&E 2016 work was \$12,000. Connexus provided \$5,000 toward the project and the balance of the costs was funded from the EDA budget. Costs for other options are to be determined.

Davis stated staff requests the EDA continue the discussion of the BR&E update relative to the method and form of the report, the desired end product of the work and the availability of resources needed to complete the project and implement its recommendations.

Lux stated she was not at the May 11 meeting, and asked if they got a good indication of the Chamber's support. Davis responded not really, but when they go to their next board meeting, he wanted to present this and would ask one or two of their officers to come to the next EDA meeting. Then they could give the EDA an idea of what they could do or maybe some commitment as to what they would be able to offer in the form of assistance.

Davis believed the Chamber would be a critical component in this. He noted the last time they did this with the Chamber's help and the Chamber was very instrumental and contributed a lot.

Erkel stated it was her thought that they had all of the data and the results would probably be similar even if they did a whole new study. She believed they had the information they needed and she wanted to take that data and go with it.

Erkel noted a lot of places still had internet issues, which they knew about and they were working on that. She stated the residents also wanted more community events and more communication between the City and businesses, etc. She suggested they work on those things and have a business expo. She believed they could keep the cost at a minimum for such an expo. She noted this would help the businesses advertise and get their names out there as well as establish a good rapport between the City and the businesses.

Lux noted that last time, 47 businesses were visited and interviewed. They had new businesses now and businesses that had changed so she would like to get a task force together and do some of the visits again.

Mundle stated one of the things he did not like about the Ohio State program was that they were just emailing the stuff and he believed they needed to get out to meet the people and visit them and get them interviewed. He suggested instead of emailing out the information volunteers visit the businesses and hand deliver the information/survey. He indicated the businesses could be given a certain amount of time to review the information and do the survey and then the volunteer could pick up the survey.

Erkel asked how many registered businesses did they have in the City. Davis responded the City did not require business licenses, so the only one that would require an IUP were for home occupations which the City had a record of most of those. The City had the Chamber list, but that was all the City had.

Erkel believed there were over 100 businesses on the Chamber list. Davis stated he believed there were approximately 80 IUP home occupations registered. Erkel noted this was about 200 businesses and IUP home occupations they would need to contact.

Mundle noted the contacting would be done by the EDA and a group of volunteers.

Bezanson did not think the home IUPs should necessarily be the focus and the focus should be on the businesses who had a brick-and-mortar facilities. He stated he wanted to see the Chamber get more involved also.

Lux stated someone with a home IUP could be a new business, and she agreed that maybe they shouldn't be the focus, but she still wanted them to be included.

Bezanson agreed they should be included. He noted a home IUP could move eventually if they outgrew their home.

Mundle stated they could come up with different interview lists for the home IUPs and the brick-and-mortar businesses. He could see there being two very distinct large issues between them and what they are trying to work with, what they are trying to accomplish, and what their needs were.

Bezanson asked what Berg thought about this. Davis responded Berg was still the Interim Community Development Director and his position would be considered at the June 26 Council meeting. He believed the most critical component of this was not staff people, but the Chamber. He stated the Chamber had the greatest role in this and there were a lot of things they could do to help facilitate their efforts. He stated it was going to take a long time to do this and they needed boots on the ground to get this done.

Erkel asked how many people were involved the last time. Lux believed there were about 30 people. She noted some of the businesses owners were also helping with this. She stated if they could drum up some interest in this it would be good for the City.

Erkel noted they had to have a good Chamber meeting because the last couple of meeting the attendance was not very good. She indicated the breakfast Chamber meetings had the best turnout.

Davis stated Berg would be at the next Chamber meeting and he would bring this subject up and extend invitations to come to the next EDA meeting. He hoped the Chamber could give them some indication of what their level of participation would be and then from that, this would define what they could do and how they were going to do it.

Lux noted they had Booster Days coming up also and this might be a good opportunity to reach out and connect with people. Davis suggested possibly having a booth at Booster Days to answer questions and solicit help from volunteers.

Erkel stated she would be willing to go up to other businesses that were there and ask if they would be willing to help also.

Davis noted even with all of the people involved the last time, they barely met their deadline and it took a really concentrated effort to pull that off. He noted it would take a wide variety and wide cross section of people to get this done.

Erkel asked if they would use the questions they had last time, or would they try and recreate them. Mundle responded that those questions might be brought forward by Mr. Darger.

Erkel stated she thought they were going to do this on their own and not use an outside service. Mundle noted once they got the data, it would be sent to Mr. Darger to process it into a report.

Davis stated he would also like to review the questions and maybe have some people in the business community review them too for their opinions and thoughts. He noted the business environment had changed a lot in the last seven years with not only Covid, but also a more concentration on online retail. He believed the biggest thing that had changed in the last seven years was the focus on attracting and retaining workers and labor.

Lux agreed there could be whole new topics they need to look at this time. She indicated the next thing they needed to determine was the cost.

Erkel stated she did not think they needed to pay someone to go through 100 or 200 surveys to get a trend. She indicated if they were a big city like Minneapolis or Blaine, it might make sense, but she believed they could figure this out themselves.

Davis stated there might be things where they want to involve some other people in where they would want to pay some of them. He believed the first thing they had to do was get a commitment from the Chamber and then figure out what they needed to do and what their strategy would be.

Lux stated it would be interesting to talk to Christine Costello from Connexus also as she had done this previously when she was in the public sector. Bezanson believed this was a good idea.

Mundle believed the next step should be talking to the Chamber and gauging their response.

Davis stated he would see if Ms. Costello was available to come to the next EDA meeting. Bezanson suggested inviting someone from the Chamber to come to that meeting also.

Lux congratulated Mayor Lewis and welcomed him to the EDA.

5.0 – City Communications Survey Report

Davis presented staff's report indicating at the recommendation of City Council and then Council Member Lewis, staff developed a survey regarding methods of communication from the City of East Bethel, and how residents receive news and information about what is happening in the City. This survey started in April and was available for responses through May 26.

Davis noted although the survey was created for online responses, efforts were made to make the survey accessible to all since not all citizens may have access to complete the survey online. The survey was promoted on the City's website and was sent out to the email subscriber list for the News Flash module. It was also promoted at the Spring Town Hall meeting, and in the City newsletter, and was communicated that it was available in paper form if individuals preferred this response method.

Davis stated in total, 76 responses were received. Although this response rate is only a small portion of our population (less than 1%), the feedback provided is sufficient to draw conclusions and provide recommendations to improve communications among citizens.

Davis indicated questions included in the survey allowed residents to provide feedback on the city's current communication efforts with citizens and recommendations for improvement. It targeted the specific methods of communication, type of information that is provided, and requested community engagement and additional suggestions.

City Council reviewed the results of the Communications Survey as exhibited in Attachment 1 to discuss how to address the responses. The more important points that the survey revealed are:

- The City Website is underutilized as a communications source;
- There appears to be a desire for more public meetings;
- More information was requested for development and public works projects;
- Other types of information desired included alerts and notifications, public hearing notices and code enforcement matters.

City Council directed staff to request the EDA to review and provide comments on the survey and include but not limit those recommendations to:

- Utilization of a consultant to assist in improving our communication efforts with our residents;
- Use of electronic and print means of communications;
- EDA's role in implementation of communication improvements.

Staff is requesting the EDA review the results of the Communications Survey and provide comments and recommendations to City Council as to options for communication improvements.

Lewis stated he was under the impression that Carrie Frost had done the website, but he had been informed that there was a consultant who had done the work. Davis stated Civic Plus was the one that put the website together and there was a local committee that actually worked a lot on the design of it. He did not know if a consultant would help too much.

Lewis stated a service provider was usually just a technical person who did the manipulation of the website, but they usually knew a lot of the people who were the actual communication consultants and they could reach out to them to see how they might be able to dial the City in with somebody.

Lewis believed the City newsletter should go out six times a year and the website be “beefed up”. Davis agreed and indicated they needed to figure out how to encourage more people to utilize the website as their first source of information and contact.

Lewis stated he would prefer to go to a website that had more information than a Facebook page which didn’t have anything else to it. He believed spending funds on a good website was worth it.

Mundle agreed it was time to redo the website as it had not been overhauled in a while. He asked if they would be eligible for a free upgrade. He believed the website did a good job, but it could be revised and updated with pertinent information put out and outdated information removed.

Mundle stated one thing he would like to review with the website was the communication survey. He stated right now they had a graph which showed only a few amounts of visits, but he would like to see the number of total visitors, unique visitors, and some of that data to actually analyze. He noted the EDA used to get a good website report previously and the report would show the stats and the metrics.

Lewis stated that was why it was important to talk to someone who was in the business so they had the whole picture. He noted this has been a pertinent issue for many years and they needed to pay attention to it. He believed the website was one area they could spend a little money on and get some improved results.

Mundle noted when this was looked at previously, Civic Plus was not the cheapest, but they were the best; they had the best quality and had the best tools and that was why he believed they were chosen. Lewis stated he gave up the view a long time ago that cheaper was better. He believed Civic Plus should be given the first opportunity at this.

Bezanson noted his son-in-law was a director of an internet sales for a large regional broadcaster in St. Cloud and he was saying that some of the things they put out on websites for their clients as basically spying on the people that clicked on the website for that business. He believed the City should be able to apply these tools also. Lewis noted from a liability aspect, he did not think they could do that and didn’t want to use the website to spy on the residents.

Bezanson noted spying was probably not the proper term, but there were tools out there. He noted what he liked about the website was that it was easy to navigate, which spoke highly of its simplicity. He indicated the only issue he had once in a while was that it locked up on him. Mundle noted he might need to upgrade his computer.

Erkel stated one of the things they should ask was when someone in the City’s zip code opened up the internet, the website was at the top of Google, Explorer, etc. So if they wanted more interaction, that would be the first thing they would see.

Mundle stated one of their goals might be to form another website committee and asked Bezanson if his son-in-law might want to volunteer at one meeting. Bezanson responded his son-in-law might be willing to do this.

Lux stated they might want to use the newsletter to draw people to the website also. She asked who prepared the newsletter and the content. Davis responded Carrie Frost was the primary person who prepared the newsletter and people gave her articles. He noted Ms. Frost was also a contributing editor for the newsletter.

Erkel suggested they might want a contest.

Lewis stated that was why he liked the idea of using consultants because it was second nature to them and then they don't have to have someone full-time on staff doing it. He noted this was a very efficient way to get things done.

Lux noted a consultant could also give the City advice on the newsletter and how to communicate correctly. Davis stated this discussion should be an ongoing evaluation. He noted they get improvements done to a certain point and then they get sidetracked onto other things, but communication was the one thing that should continue to demand their attention.

Lux noted it was tricky to figure out how to reach certain residents because some residents might not want to connect with the internet and might rather want to show up at a Council meeting instead. Lewis agreed one method was not going to do it and they would need multiple ways to communicate.

Davis stated from what he was hearing, he would contact Civic Plus and get some kind of an RFP for the EDA to review and then they might want a committee to work on this. He noted this could be an ongoing discussion at the EDA meetings.

Mundle noted some larger cities had staff devoted to social media and communication, but East Bethel did not have that. However, once they got things figured out maybe they could have someone come in once a week or once a month to update the website if changes were needed so everything was not on Ms. Frost's shoulders.

Lewis noted that was something they needed to keep in mind and not stretch their human resources too thin. Davis stated when you add staff they needed to make sure there was a real need.

Lewis stated he had made a comment at the Council meeting that the survey was his idea and he was glad he suggested it and he believed this was of tremendous value. He indicated this was his attempt at humor and he wanted the EDA to know that. He stated the Commissioners did not know him and he did not take himself seriously at all, so it was a joke, but it was note written like it was but he seriously meant it.

Lewis noted the *East Bethel Bulletin* had a community vision on it. He asked if this was still the City's vision. He indicated he was bringing this up for people to think about.

6.0 – Business Activity Report

Davis summarized the development projects in the City including the Holiday Station project at the intersection of 187th Lane and Highway 65; the Elevage project; Kwik Trip; bond issuance for Nexus; Designing Earth Contracting; Viking Meadow Golf Course; and, Hunter's Inn.

Lux stated she was excited about the greenhouse.

7.0 – City Council Report

Mundle updated the EDA on recent Council activity.

8.0 – Adjournment

Erkel moved and Bezanson seconded to adjourn at 8:07 pm. To the motion, all in favor say aye. **All in favor.** That motion passes. **Motion passes unanimously.**

Submitted by:

Kathy Altman

TimeSaver Off Site Secretarial, Inc.