

Minutes
Rural Virginia Action Committee Meeting
Board of Directors of the Virginia Economic Development Partnership
January 27, 2021
12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.
[Zoom Meeting]

Welcome and Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 12:00 p.m. by Chair Rick Harrell, who noted that a quorum was present.

Members present: Chair Rick Harrell, Secretary Brian Ball, Carrie Chenery, Deborah Flippo, Secretary Aubrey Layne, Dan Pleasant, and Ned Masee, *ex officio*

Members absent: None

Other Board Members: Dan Clemente and Marianne Radcliff

VEDP staff present: Lindsay Barker, Vince Barnett, Christine Bell, David Devan, Jason El Koubi, Stephanie Florie, Sandi McNinch, Lori Melancon, Debbie Melvin, Stephen Moret, Christy Morton, Jordan Snelling, and Carrie Vuori

Guests present: Tamarah Holmes, Erik Johnston, Deputy Secretary Cass Rasnick, and Chandler Vaughan

Opening Remarks

Chair Harrell welcomed guests to the electronic meeting of VEDP's Rural Virginia Action Committee. Chair Harrell shared these remarks: "As you well know, the Governor declared a state of emergency in March due to the potential spread of COVID-19. Because an in-person meeting is unsafe and we wish to discharge our lawful purposes, duties and responsibilities, we are permitted by the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, as amended by the State Budget, to meet by electronic means without a quorum of our members being physically assembled at one location.

We are gathered now in a Zoom environment that is open to the public. Should anyone from the public get disconnected from the public Zoom environment and be unable to re-engage, he or she should call (804) 278-7702 and speak to Jennifer Garrett. We will do our best to re-engage and will halt the public portion of the meeting until the connection can be re-established.

Here are reminders of a few things that will be different than our in-person meetings:

- Everything on the public Zoom environment will be recorded, and the recording will be posted on VEDP's website.
- All votes will be taken by roll call.

- Please use the mute function unless you are speaking—and remember to unmute at the appropriate time.
- During the public comment period, any member of the public wishing to make a comment may simply unmute and speak at that time or use the Chat function and ask to be given an opportunity to speak.
- Likewise, during the meeting, Committee members may simply unmute themselves to speak or use the Chat function.

Public Comment Period

Chair Harrell solicited public comments. There were none.

Approval of Minutes for October 21, 2020 Meeting

Chair Harrell asked for approval of the minutes from the October 21, 2020, meeting. A motion was made by Ms. Chenery and seconded by Ms. Flippo, and the minutes were approved as presented by roll call vote:

Upon the vote:	Secretary Ball	Absent for vote
	Ms. Chenery	Aye
	Ms. Flippo	Aye
	Mr. Harrell	Aye
	Secretary Layne	Aye
	Mr. Pleasant	Absent for vote

Updates to the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI) Program – Erik Johnston, Director & Tamarah Holmes, Director of the Office of Broadband with DHCD

Chair Harrell welcomed and introduced our speakers, Mr. Erik Johnston, Director of the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), and Dr. Tamarah Holmes, Director of the Office of Broadband with DHCD.

Mr. Johnston thanked Chair Harrell and said he appreciated the invitation to speak to today's group of leaders. Mr. Johnston shared that VEDP is such a critical partner to DHCD.

Mr. Johnston also thanked Secretary Layne and Secretary Ball for their help. He shared that DHCD has been involved with broadband for some years. Under the Governor's leadership and moving broadband to a key focus, the program has gone from a \$4 million annual program to a \$50 million annual program with robust support from the General Assembly.

Mr. Johnston shared that the Commonwealth merged all of the key last-mile broadband planning capacities and grants under DHCD on July 1, 2020. Before the merger, the broadband mapping and broadband planning activities with localities were housed at the Center for Innovative Technology (CIT). He mentioned that DHCD has been able to use Community Block Grant program funds to offer broadband planning grants to rural localities.

Mr. Johnston mentioned that the Governor's FY2022 introduced budget is currently \$49.725 million. The VATI program, administered by DHCD, funds public-private partnerships to supplement broadband infrastructure construction costs to extend service to areas not served by a broadband provider. VATI funds one-time capital improvement projects to build last-mile

broadband to unserved communities. Previous investments have been critical to households and businesses during the pandemic continuing to work. This investment is an emergency response to the pandemic but a long-term investment in universal coverage.

Mr. Johnston said that because of the Commonwealth's investments, over 108,000 Virginia households had service during the pandemic with access to Zoom for education, telehealth, and continuing to work would not have been possible without these investments.

Mr. Johnston mentioned that to date, VATI has awarded \$25 million to 29 localities, connecting 53,254 homes, businesses, and community anchors. VATI's latest \$49.7 million round will be announced in the coming months and is expected to connect tens of thousands more Virginians.

Mr. Johnston spoke briefly about the CARES Act. He shared that 30,822 Virginia homes and businesses have been connected with some of those funds. Seventy-one total projects have come from those funds, and they are not just last-mile projects.

Open Discussion and Anticipated Topics for Next Meeting

Ms. Chenery shared that she would like to revisit the Rural Leadership Institute initiative with the Center for Rural Virginia. She also wondered how the committee might support that effort.

Mr. Pleasant mentioned an initiative from years ago called the Virginia Economic Bridge. It was an attempt to connect rural Virginia with Northern Virginia. It was similar to a mentoring program, business to business. Its purpose was to identify opportunities with Northern Virginia technology firms that could potentially staff jobs in rural Virginia.

Mr. Moret asked Mr. Barnett if he recalled some history since he was at VEDP during this time. Mr. Barnett was familiar with the Virginia Economic Bridge initiative and said it was around for many years, but he did not recall if there were any successes. Staff stated they would provide an update at the next meeting.

Chair Harrell spoke about the Local and Regional Competitiveness Initiative (LRCI) and praised Mr. Watkins and Ms. Faye for producing an outstanding document. He said it has so much information that anyone who wants to improve their local EDA could do it.

Mr. Clemente shared when he first came on to the Board; there wasn't a Rural Virginia Action committee. He is very thankful for the Rural Virginia Action Committee but would like to know if VEDP communicates what they are doing for rural Virginia. Secretary Ball stated the Administration has been very present in the state's rural parts during this Administration. Mr. Moret shared that VEDP provides updates in many ways to all of our partners.

Chair Harrell ended by saying the Rural Virginia Action Committee has made tremendous progress.

Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Harrell adjourned the meeting at 1:04 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Christine Bell
Acting Recording Secretary

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