

Minutes
Rural Virginia Action Committee Meeting
Board of Directors of the Virginia Economic Development Partnership
September 13, 2023
2:45 p.m.

901 East Cary Street
One James Center, Board Room, 9th Floor
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Welcome and Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 2:45 p.m. by Chair Rush, who noted that a quorum was present.

In-Person Committee Members: Chair Nick Rush, Carrie Chenery, Mimi Coles, Stephen Edwards, Rick Harrell, John Hewa, and Secretary Caren Merrick

Committee Members Absent: Nancy Agee

Other In-Person Board Members: Secretary Stephen Cummings, Pace Lochte, Marianne Radcliff, and Will Sessoms

Virtual Board Members: Bill Hayter

In-Person VEDP Staff Members: Lesley Brown, Greg Burkart, Star Cranston, Nicole David, David Devan, Jason El Koubi, Stef Florie, Chris Hughes, Debbie Melvin, Nicole Riley, Tim Stuller, Vickie Tilkey, Lisa Wallmeyer, and Abigail Wescott

Virtual VEDP Staff Members: Carrie Vuori

In-Person Guests: Richard Bishop, James Campos, Will Payne, Kendra Shifflett, Jerry Silva, and Stephen Versen

Virtual Guests: Chelsea Jenkins and Kim McKay

Public Comment Period

Chair Rush asked if any members of the public wished to comment. There were none.

Approval of Minutes for March 8, 2023

Chair Rush requested approval of the March 8, 2023, meeting minutes. A motion was made by Ms. Coles and seconded by Mr. Hewa, and the minutes were unanimously approved as presented.

Taskforce for Rural Virginia Economic Growth Update

Chair Rush introduced Jason El Koubi to provide a VEDP update.

Mr. El Koubi discussed the importance of ensuring that VEDP, in collaboration with its partners, puts appropriate emphasis on rural economic development issues/challenges. He explained that ensuring that every region of the Commonwealth participates in the Commonwealth's growth and keeping each region in positive territory is the second transformational goal of VEDP's Strategic Plan.

Mr. El Koubi shared some of the challenges and opportunities of the Commonwealth's rural regions and small metro regions with pockets of rural areas.

Mr. El Koubi spoke about the Rural Think Tank and explained why it was created in 2017. He said that it was a way of getting all the key stakeholders on rural issues together to agree on a list of priorities. The group could then acknowledge those priorities and work to get them addressed over the course of time.

Mr. El Koubi briefly reviewed the priorities of the Rural Think Tank and how the priorities were addressed. He said the effort was successful in terms of creating legitimacy for VEDP's Strategic Plan in rural communities and substantially moving the needle on many of the issues that were most important to the rural communities in terms of their economic development success. It also helped to bring awareness to other issues that are important across the Commonwealth, such as marketing, sites, and workforce. He said that it is time to update the list of priorities.

The presentation was turned over to Abigail Wescott. Ms. Wescott discussed revamping the Rural Think Tank to be a more impact-oriented group. She said the idea is to move from a think tank to a task force and to reconstruct the group to include all rural localities, including rural areas located within urban or metropolitan areas.

Ms. Wescott shared that there would be participation and support from all levels of government within the Commonwealth, and the task force would cultivate positive impact through action-oriented collaboration. She said that the group will focus on targeting areas of concern and working to find sustainable solutions. She added that the task force's mission would be to work with various state partners, demonstrating collaboration and partnership across the Commonwealth between Virginia's rural communities and other state entities.

Ms. Wescott shared that VEDP will organize and implement a rural-focused group comprised of the leadership of all levels within rural regions of Virginia. She said that the task force will consist of 12-15 members representing diverse rural geographical regions, including elected officials, economic development partners, and other partners from the education and business sectors. She explained that VEDP has been working closely with the Tobacco Commission and the Virginia Rural Center in the task force revamp.

The Committee briefly discussed who would take the lead on the new task force and an action plan on how its development may possibly affect the Virginia Rural Center and where the Center will fit into the task force framework. The Committee also discussed the initial makeup of the task force.

Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission Update

Ms. Wescott introduced guests from the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission. James Campos, Deputy Secretary of Commerce and Trade and Acting Director; Steven Versus, Deputy Director; and Jerry Silva, Director of Regional Energy Development and Innovation.

Mr. Campos provided an overview of the Tobacco Commission and its work. He discussed its funding priorities, which include education and workforce development, industrial and business infrastructure, and agribusiness. Mr. Campos reviewed the Commission's new initiatives, including how the Commission is in the process of creating a foundation, which will focus on four new areas of growth. He outlined the details of each.

Mr. Campos spoke about the Commission's excitement to be involved in the revamp of the Rural Think Tank.

Chair Rush thanked Mr. Campos for his presentation.

Evolve Central Appalachia Presentation

Ms. Wescott introduced Dr. Richard Bishop, a professor of Practice at Virginia Tech, and Will Payne, Managing Director of Energy Delta Lab. Mr. Payne provided an overview of Energy Delta Lab, what they do, and their current projects. He explained that about \$600 million of Federal grants have been pursued in the last eight months, and Virginia should know by November if it is in the running for some of those grant dollars.

Dr. Bishop spoke about about EVOLVE CAPP, a rare earth and critical mineral research project that will enable the U.S. to reduce dependency on rare earth and critical mineral imports and advance new industries.

The general scope of the project is to assess existing knowledge, perform a gap analysis, and fill identified gaps with future projects, along with educational and public outreach.

Dr. Bishop shared background information on “Critical” Minerals. The USGE 2022 Critical Minerals Report includes 50 Mineral Commodities, classification based on import share and countries of origin. He said the World Bank estimates that “energy critical minerals” (Lithium Cobalt) need to increase by 500% by 2050. These rare earth “critical” minerals are important for strategic and defence applications and moving towards a greener economy (solar panels and windmills).

Dr. Bishop shared that more work needs to be done to develop the technology to extract these rare earth minerals so that the United States will not be so dependent on sources that could become hostile or satisfy their own internal demand versus exporting the minerals to other countries. He shared a summary of issues, barriers, and incentives.

Following Dr. Bishop’s presentation, the Board engaged in a robust discussion on the details of the project.

Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Rush adjourned the meeting at 3:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Lesley Brown