



COUNTY OF AMHERST

Public Information Officer

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For Immediate Release

December 6, 2018

EDA's Strategic Plan Progress

AMHERST, VA- Three years ago, Amherst County was facing the closing of two of its biggest employers, the loss of 1,200 jobs, and \$87 million in annual economic activity. This created a call to action. Since then, Amherst has taken these obstacles and created success.

In 2016, the Economic Development Authority (EDA) conducted the most comprehensive analysis of the Amherst County economy has ever undertaken, resulting in the Amherst County Economic Development Strategic Plan. The Plan had five strategies that directly addressed challenges and opportunities for sustainable economic growth in Amherst County. The Board of Supervisors unanimously endorsed the plan and increased funding to the EDA to implement the Strategic Plan. The five projects were Branding, Space for Businesses to Grow, Small Business and Entrepreneur Development, Education and Workforce Development, and Leadership Development.

Branding

So what has been accomplished? The first initiative was Branding. Amherst County had no clear brand identity to set them apart or make them easily recognizable. The EDA hired a branding firm in February of 2017, and engaged the community and stakeholders in a branding process that resulted in a brand that is being used by the EDA, County, Town of Amherst, Schools, Libraries, Visitor Center, and other organizations. The Brand has been implemented on websites, social media, signs, advertising materials, and promotions. The total cost of branding was \$27,753.

Space for Businesses to Grow

Every business, small or large, needs a home. Economic development has grown more competitive over the last few years, and County industrial parks needed enhancements to compete in today's marketplace. Accordingly, the EDA completed environmental and geotechnical tests on all the Amelon Commerce Center lots and the last remaining lot in the Zane Snead Industrial Park. Additionally, companies looking to expand want graded sites to be able to build quickly, start operations with less risk, and increase speed to market. Amherst led the way and graded a 14 acre site in the Amelon Commerce Center, which was the only graded site in the region at that time. That graded site has several interested buyers at this time and has cost \$230,606.

Small Business and Entrepreneur Development

Small businesses are the foundation of the Amherst County economy. Almost ninety percent of the companies in the County employ less than 10 people. Twenty-five percent are sole proprietors. Last November, Amherst County became the first Certified Entrepreneur Community in Virginia. The EDA, along with community leaders and business owners accomplished two initiatives. The resource matrix, and LINK Amherst, a networking group that helps educate business owners on relevant problems. LINK Amherst continues to meet. The resource matrix will be mailed to businesses

and available at key locations in County offices. The total cost for the program and the matrix was \$4,352.

Small businesses in Amherst said that telecommunication was one of their biggest hurdles. The EDA has assisted businesses in the Amelon Commerce Center and other places gain access to high-speed internet. The cost of the assistance was \$6,370.

Last year, the Board of Supervisors requested the EDA examine the County's reputation for being unfriendly to business and suggest changes to County ordinances, processes, policies or procedures to improve the business environment for both existing and new businesses in Amherst County. At the beginning of 2018, an intense six-month investigation resulted in a large number of recommendations to the Board of Supervisors who prioritized the top five recommendations, and directed staff to begin implementation. One of the recommendations was to hire a consultant to analyze the County tax structure and recommend changes. That analysis was presented in November 2018, and the Board of Supervisors agreed with the report recommendations and directed staff to gather the necessary tax information, and by September 2019, suggest ordinances that follow the recommendations:

1. Replace the current Merchants Capital Tax with a Business License (BPOL) Tax on retailers and wholesalers.
 2. Adopt a sliding scale to decrease a businesses' machinery & tools and tangible personal property to account for depreciation of the property.
 3. Consider a slight increase in the Machinery & Tools tax rate to keep the tax changes revenue neutral.
- The projected change would take place in 2020.

Leadership Development

Leadership Amherst, a leadership development course, began in 2016, successfully graduated its first class, and almost doubled its size in its second year. Leadership development is the defining factor of success in economic development. With a declining population, less diversity, and the loss of young people, Amherst County must be proactive in developing its future leaders. Amherst businesses and residents, the County is listening. We heard the over 600 participants that spoke up during the Strategic Plan and changes have already been, and continue to be, implemented. In the future, the Leadership program will hopefully become self-sustaining but \$19,754 was spent over the last two years.

Moving Forward

Strategic Plan projects that the EDA is working on that will take several years to complete are:

Develop a state-of-the-art workforce training system - Establish a task force and analyze current workforce system to determine how best to create a pipeline of skilled workers with a focus on trades. The EDA is in the analysis and pre-development phase of an industrial incubator for smaller existing businesses needing room to grow and also for emerging and start-up businesses who need an affordable, readily available, industrial facility (high ceilings, roll up doors, loading dock, etc.) The budget for the incubator will vary depending upon the size of the new building.

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