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TEN QUESTIONS WITH MICK BERRY

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In your view, what have been the most significant strategic plan accomplishments in the past few months?

Right out of the chute, the Commissioners made some definitive decisions about how they wanted to move forward on economic development. They gave direction to the EDC about how to tweak the business incentive and recruitment program to be more aggressive, but also to ensure that those investments are coming right back to the community for other opportunities. The shell building program that's been successful is a great example.

You're referring to the Board's decision a few years ago to build a speculative manufacturing facility in Claremont International Business Park in order to help attract employers to Catawba County, right? The one that [DAE Systems recently purchased and moved into](#)?

Yes. The Board decided to take the proceeds from the first building and invest them right back into a second shell building, which is now in the works. We know where it's going to be and who the partners are going to be, and we're now working out the agreement so that'll be coming up very quick.

What about [Park 1764](#), the class A business park off Startown Road near CVCC? How is that progressing?

Although all of us still want to see dirt turning, I think we've made a lot of strides on Park 1764. The City of Hickory and the County have come together to make it happen, and we've formalized that partnership. We have plans in place for building the entrance and the berm, and we're now starting the process of turning it into a business park.

People are starting to hear more about [K-64](#), the new educational initiative that aims to prepare students of all ages with real-world skills that will translate into viable future careers. Where are we with that?

We have been recruiting for the five board positions that will represent the business sector. These companies will also make significant financial contributions. We've had a first round of meetings with potential corporate partners, and those meetings were very well received.

We also just had a [formal signing ceremony to officially launch K-64](#). It was great to watch representatives from all the partner organizations, including our three school systems, CVCC, our Board of Commissioners, the Chamber, and the EDC all step up and sign the K-64 agreement in front of a crowd of 250 people. It really showed their commitment to making K-64 a reality.

I'm pleasantly surprised and almost shocked that we've been able to make it this far this fast, because K-64 represents a huge scope of work. There are lots of organizations and people involved, which speaks to the fact that we're all on the same page with great working partnerships and ease of communication.

What's coming up next for K-64?

Once the K-64 board is in place, their next step will be to bring an executive director on board to operationalize the program. From there, it's a matter of looking at what schools have going on, looking at the programs that are working and then selecting some to be piloted. We'll then need to expand to more schools and figure out how to start linking programs together. The whole idea is that every school at some point has all of the K-64 strategies [*1-to-world technology, character development, tech savvy educators, work-based learning, employer engagement, and career adaptability*] working together.

What's the vision for how that will come together?

It's not going to be a universal across-the-board roll-out; for example, we won't be addressing technology solutions at every school all at once. We might be working on character education in some schools while we're establishing work-

based learning programs in others. K-64 strategies will be phased in based on the school systems' assessments of school readiness, and they're in that process right now. They're evaluating where they are ready and what they're ready to do so they can present proposals to the K-64 board.

Now that the Board of Commissioners' initial work sessions are wrapped up, what's next?

Now is when all of the hard work really starts. We've formed the broad vision, we've seen how we can do this, and we believe we can do this. Now we've got to break it down into bite-sized chunks and just keep getting it done, one step at a time.

There were a lot of to-dos that came out of those initial sessions. We have to do some additional research to formalize the plan in some areas, including housing, arts and culture, broadband, and healthy and safe community. We're also doing more investigation. Part of this is about benchmarking against the competition, so the Board just took a trip to Raleigh to learn more about shared service centers and Wake County's EMS continuum of care model. They also toured Treyburn Business Park in Durham to learn how that economic development site came together so successfully. I imagine we'll end up taking a few more site visits where we can really benchmark against the competition and apply what we learn here in Catawba County.

You and the Board have been discussing the strategic plan with various city councils and community groups. How has it been received?

Everything happening in the community right now is tying back to the recognition that we have got to grow our population and we have got to improve our workforce. Everyone is really on the same page. Being in this community 27 years, I've never seen so much unanimity in terms of, "Yep, we get it. This is our A-number-one issue and all of us have to do our part to accomplish that goal."

Our partners appreciate the Board's leadership and the fact that the Board has kept them informed. They've sent staff out to meet with city councils and different partners to tell them what we're working on and to bring them into this process. It's been really well received.

What, if anything, has surprised you during this process?

First of all, the speed. When we first set out to crank this out over six or seven months, I told the Commissioners it was a lofty goal, that even though we're going to work hard to get there, it's probably going to take a lot longer. And it's been a little longer because we've added work sessions, but I'm amazed by how fast we've gotten through it. That speed has come because we have such awesome staff. Part of my hesitation was from being a new manager not really knowing this team and how well they work, and to see it in action has been fantastic.

The passion of the Commissioners has also really been energizing, because we'll talk through all these things at their meetings and we'll all get excited about the possibilities. We then come back and start rolling up our sleeves to figure out how we're going to do all this. When we bring it back to them and talk through it again, they still have that same energy and passion and desire to move the community forward. There's a nice synergy there.

Anything you'd like to add?

I would just continue to ask all of our coworkers to stay engaged in this, to understand what we're doing and to be community ambassadors. When we're trying to attract people to live in this community, there's nothing better than hearing people who already live here saying, "I love it, it's great, I'm happy where my kids are in school, the quality of life is great and getting better." That will sell people coming to this area more than anything. So you've got to be plugged in, you've got to know what's going on and you've got to promote it.

I'm a great example of that. I didn't know the City of Newton had this world-class mountain biking track a mile and a half from my house, and now I'm riding it three times a week. It has personally increased my quality of life. I love it. I look forward to that, and I didn't even know about it until a few months ago. I'm a great example of how you've got to open your eyes and look around and see what's available to you.