

## Positioning Continues over Avery Development

Written by Annie Rutenberg

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The Monday meeting of the Avery County Commission seemed a time to declare positions on issues—like economic development. Noticeably absent was Bret Gardella, Economic Development Director, who released a long missive directed at Commissioner Reo Griffith in the May meeting. Griffith, then issued a statement regarding his expectations for Economic Development at the meeting, trying to make it clear that he is not against Economic Development, but is looking to protect the tax payers and private enterprises. He referred to statutes regarding Economic Development, saying it must be funded primarily through grant monies and not tax payers dollars. On the controversial issue of Incubators, he said there must be a realistic business plan, a Board of Directors or advisers and there must be a clear understanding of the County's strength and weaknesses. Toward that end, he requested project costs and profitability projections for the current facility. He stated that, according to the NC School of Government, an Incubator can play a vital role, but it is seldom that it alone can turn around the local economy. Griffith stated, "I am not against Economic Development, it is an honor to serve on the Board of Commissioners." He said he is thankful for the right to free speech and is here to represent the people who elected him to voice their concerns. He then presented a prepared list of questions for the next Board Meeting June 17. But County Manager Robert Wiseman stated it will be difficult to come up with formal answers to some of the questions, considering there is no historical data.

With that issue to be resolved, Commissioner Glenn Johnson offered a brief statement that he has never discriminated or verbally abused any employee of Avery County and requested for that be on the record and Commissioner Forbes agreed. Then Commissioner Forbes stated that no disparaging comments be linked to her regarding employees or the County.

Avery County Manager Robert Wiseman gave updates on renovations of Courthouse, insurance quotes for state employees and Rural Hope Grant which will enable the renovation of the former Sherman's site to be a medical and dental facility to treat patients regardless of their ability to pay. This facility will create 14 new jobs, and have a positive impact on downtown Newland. Avery County ranked lowest of all 100 counties in NC and this will be a huge step to improve medical and dental care. The County will apply for a \$70,000 grant, \$5,000 for each new job created, and match it with 10% or \$7,000.

A Public Hearing was scheduled regarding the county's Secondary Road Improvement, and the Commissioners approved \$246,141.30 for road projects damaged due to flooding this spring. The Board approved unanimously.