

Incubator, Brewery Draws Crowd, Controversy

Written by Annie Rutenberg
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The meeting site of the Avery Commission last night was filled with a standing room only crowd to voice their opinion on the discussion concerning use of incubator. A major issue was a letter of intent to open a Brewery in the Old Banner Elk School, incubator program, with Commissioner

Glenn Johnson, a strong supporter of the incubator and Economic Development in Avery County, speaking at length about the benefits of an incubator program and the need to provide jobs for young people. Martha Hicks stated the difficulty of separating County government from personal beliefs while doing what the people in Avery County want. Kenny Poteat, who has served as a Commissioner for 20 years and feels his time as a public servant could be coming to an end, stated that this was one of the biggest issues ever faced. Phyllis Forbes commented on the incubator as a spark to economic growth and that the decision to go forward with the incubator was made in good faith with the people of Avery County in mind. But Commissioner Reo Griffith compiled a timeline of events beginning with the introduction of the incubator on September 15th, 2011, stating he ran for County Commissioner "as a fiscal conservative Republican candidate." He reflected back to discussions and concerns that there is no written material and that \$153,942 has been budgeted for Economic Development with \$75,000 been used for AC PRIDE. Rick Owen stated at a prior meeting that no Board has yet been appointed. As of today Reo Griffith stated there is still no Board and said that, so far \$140,000 has been spent on a project that may never exist. He stated that, "in the past 536 days since its introduction, no permits have been issued, Avery County has not prepared leases, there are no legally binding guarantees and we don't know the cost, impact, income, economic benefit that the incubator will provide to Avery County.

Many concerned citizens voiced their opinion and disappointment over the proposed use of the Old Banner Elk school and the use of taxpayer dollars to house a Brewery. Some said, if one wants to build a brewery it should be done on private land and not subsidized by the taxpayers, and even a Class Action suit was discussed to stop the project. Junior Sluder asked that the Commissioners "do what's right." Tammy Baker stated "We need more things for young people and we can't resort to a brewery." Pastor Brad Calhoun stated he has no problem with an incubator program but he sees firsthand the problems of addiction and does not believe the County should subsidize a brewery by offering lower rents under the incubator program. First, Commissioner Reo Griffith made a motion to stop the incubator program, but the motion died due to a lack of a second. Then Griffith rephrased the motion to stop the brewery and Martha Hicks seconded the motion. Glenn Johnson and Phyllis Forbes voted against the motion and the crowd was at the edge of their seats as chair Kenny Poteat remained the deciding vote. Mr. Poteat voted against the brewery to the cheers of those gathered. Reo Griffith also made it clear that based on statutes no more money will be spent on the project without a Public Hearing.

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