

## Avery Commission; More Incubator Controversy

Written by Annie Rutenberg

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It was a bumpy night for the Avery County Board of Commissioners, meeting Monday night—the issue—still—the economic development project known as AC PRIDE, a business incubator at the Old Banner Elk Elementary. Architect David Patrick Moses responded by letter to Bret Gardella, stating, "We had previously sent to you a proposal indicating that we would do this work on a time basis and gave a range of what we thought that fee would be." He went on, saying, "To demonstrate our belief in the growth of Avery County and to help expedite the project and the Town of Banner Elk submittal process, we would be willing to donate our time through the requirements for the conditional use permit as per the following summary." The letter went on to summarize what items would be covered in the comprehensive site plan, detailing the County's responsibilities in the process, Moses' letter concluding, "The information ... is provided as part of the conditional use permit application only. We are not providing any additional warranties for any existing conditions of the building or additional requirements for plumbing, mechanical, electrical, or building code requirements for the project, nor does it include time for any meetings with the Planning Boards or Town Council. These items would all be considered as a separate item."

Commissioner Reo Griffith addressed the expenditure of Economic Development funds and funds spent on the old Banner Elk School, saying "We do not know what it will cost the people of Avery County." He went on to say it has been 565 days since Incubator project was proposed and, "We are still waiting for inspectors, we still don't know what it will require to bring it up to code, there are no signed leases, we are waiting for an explanation of application process, criteria for businesses, how many jobs will be created, admission guidelines, projected cost revenue and when will it become self sufficient." Griffith also questioned the status of grant money assistance, stating that, "No one can explain the public benefit to Avery County." Questions arose over the authenticity of the Architect donating their time, with accusations made that there were under the table dealings which Mr. Gardella vehemently denied and asked that he and the Commissioners not be besmirched." Then David Patrick Moses stood, saying it was ludicrous to insinuate underhanded dealings, and when asked if he ever did work for free in the past he said, "yes." A shouting match erupted until chairman Poteat stepped in, threatening that the meeting will be closed. Griffith then made a motion to stop the incubator and all funding. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Hicks, but failed in a 2-3 vote with Glenn Johnson, Kenny Poteat and Phyllis Forbes in favor of continuing support and funding of the incubator.

Other items on the agenda included Travis Proctor and the revised Resolution Expressing Support for Preservation of the Right to Bear Arms which the Commissioners approved unanimously, a slide presentation by Rob Lacey presenting the cost of substance abuse on Avery County and the savings from community based treatment. Scott Heath presented the

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need for recreational facilities when building new schools and the positive economic impact it would have on Avery County. When tournaments take place it brings money into the county and offers an economic boon via lodging, meals, shopping and gate admission. Mr. Heath informed the Commissioners that according to the Watauga TDA and Parks and Recreation estimate a single weekend tournament has a \$150,000+ impact on the local economy yearly. Also on the Agenda were representatives from Architectural Detail Group to provide energy saving lighting for all county facilities and requesting authority to continue discussion with TVA regarding rebates for this project. The Board voted unanimously to continue discussions.

Also discussed was a proposed agreement with North Carolina Wireless, LLC regarding leasing property at Hawshaw Fire Tower to obtain reliable broadband internet access to serve the citizens of Avery County. The resolution was approved contingent upon the property owners doing more research regarding an easement on the property.