

Incubator Hot Topic at Avery Commission

Written by Annie Rutenberg
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A Public Hearing was held in Monday's Avery Commission meeting to authorize expenditure of public funds to install heating systems in Unit 5 and 6 in the economic development project known as AC PRIDE in the former Banner Elk Elementary School. The issue is a budget amendment spending an additional \$8942.56 after \$20,000 was already allocated for heating for 6-8 units. In the public comment session, Junior Sluder spoke to the Commissioners and stated his belief that the decision was already made to install the heaters and that it is 'a done deal,' but Chairman Poteat addressed Sluder's concern, saying the it is not a done deal. Other questions arose during public comment about how an existing business looking to expand can be considered a distressed business, and therefore eligible. It was stated that the premise of the incubator is to offer new and distressed businesses the help they need to succeed. It was also pointed out that the first business located at the incubator is a realtor who has been in business for many years. Others proposed for the facility include Highland Pro Clean, an existing business in Newland with plans to open a second location at the incubator. Commissioner Reo Griffith stated that so far AC PRIDE has not created any new jobs in Avery County and questioned the logic of approving the expenditure of heaters when the two potential new tenants are not yet approved to move in. He suggested the heaters be installed contingent upon approval of the new prospective tenants as no leases have been signed nor have the tenants passed the requirements to be eligible to participate in the incubator project. Before a motion was made, Commissioner Glenn Johnson asked Griffith if he wants to see the project succeed, and Griffith replied that he wants the project to succeed as long as it benefits the taxpayers in Avery County. Commissioner Phyllis Forbes stated the County must invest in the future and provide education for new and struggling businesses, and Commissioner Martha Hicks stated that initially she was not in favor of ACPRIDE but now she is committed to helping it prosper and the improvements in the building is increasing the value of the building. Finally, a motion was made to begin work immediately to install heaters while, amended with the County Attorney asking for including the contingency to wait till the two tenants were approved. The motion was made without the contingency and passed 4-1 with Griffith voting against. A special public hearing will be held February 17th to seek to approve the tenants.

Also on the agenda was Phil Trew requesting the Board approve the High Country Bike Plan which would connect 7 counties in Western North Carolina and bring tourism and make biking safer. The Bike Plan was approved unanimously.