

## Incubator Hearing Allows Two New Firms

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There was dispute out of the gate at a public hearing Monday night regarding approval of two leases for AC Pride, the Avery business incubator in the former Banner Elk Elementary building. Commissioner Reo Griffith stated prior to the hearing that the County was not in compliance with North Carolina law in posting notices of the hearing on the county website, but County Attorney Hal Harrison countered that since the hearing was posted in the newspaper and at the boardroom, "substantial compliance" was met. After that, Commissioners voted unanimously to move forward with hearing, which involved two lease agreements, one with Highland Pro Clean, currently located in Newland, and Custom Designs, currently a home based drapery, sewing and installation business. Andrew Johansen, President of Highland Pro Cleaning told the board his reasons for wishing to open a second location at AC Pride and expressed his appreciation for the opportunity. He said his company was started by his father 36 years ago and is the only cleaning and restoration business in Avery County. His business became distressed after father was diagnosed with cancer and had to leave the business, with a drop of 53% since. Prior to 2013, there were 8 full time employees and currently there are 2. He stated his hopes that entering the incubator he will create new jobs and revive the business.

Pilar Harding operates a home based business looking to expand. Harding said she came to Banner Elk 23 years ago from Mexico, graduated from Appalachian State University, became a US citizen 4 years ago and called the opportunity "a dream come true." Harding said the incubator will allow her to take classes and continue learning so she can grow her business. Financial issues became the next sticking point, with Commissioner Griffith citing chapter and verse about financial statements being public record once it was provided to selection committee in order to qualify as a distressed business. Commissioner Griffith stated that, as a matter of record, when financial statements were reviewed by a public body, they then became public record. He questioned the timing of the financial statements, saying that at the February 3 Public Hearing, the selection committee had already reviewed the statements, but the computer documents were not produced till February 6th and written on February 6th, 2014. Those points were countered, calling the information 'trade secrets,' keeping Highland Pro Clean from having to make financial statements public. Harding's requirements are different as a new early stage business, and she has 10 days to provide an affidavit to keep her financial info private or it will become public record. John Millan spoke in the public hearing, asking if there were background investigations for tenants and if benchmarks were set to determine success, and asked if competing businesses be able to apply for tax breaks. He also addressed liability concerns for the County in the event someone got hurt. In the end, motions to approve both Highland Pro Clean and Custom Designs were made by Commissioner Glenn Johnson and both approved 4-1 with Commissioner Griffith voting against.