

Avery Developer Responds to Criticism

Written by Steve Frank/Annie Rutenberg
Wednesday, 08 May 2013 13:34

Responding to criticism from an open session of the Avery Board of Commissioners, Avery Economic Development Director Bret Gardella issued a letter to commission chair Ken Poteat, a letter that fully addresses all the criticisms of commissioner Reo Griffith. Gardella said, "I have no personal attacks against

those who have chosen to defame me and instead will tell you the truth and actual facts of the work that we've been doing in the Economic Development Office for Avery County." He went on to detail increases granted his department, travel expenses, marketing strategies that were addressed, and concluded by saying, "I've personally approached Mr. Griffith on 4 occasions over the last 10 months to set up a meeting to discuss what we're doing and have been rebuffed. I'm also aware that other commissioners have approached him to visit with me but he refuses. Gardella's letter is posted in its entirety below:

May 6, 2013

To: Avery County Commissioners, Avery County Manager
From: Bret Gardella, Avery County Economic Development Director
Re: Economic Development Update.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

At the outset I want to say how saddening it is to me that our local politics have devolved into another example of the politics of personal destruction. The Lord's Prayer teaches us to ask for forgiveness of our sins and to forgive those who've sinned against us. And I've done just that. I have no personal attacks against those who have chosen to defame me and instead will tell you the truth and actual facts of the work that we've been doing in the Economic Development Office for Avery County

At the April 1st County Commissioners meeting, Mr. Griffith read a diatribe that accused me of several incorrect items. Let me correct them here:

First, let's discuss the Budget for the Economic Development office. Did the budget increase? Yes. But why is the important information the public wasn't made privy to by Mr. Griffith. For several years prior to my arrival the Budget was approximately 25 thousand dollars. This was because economic development was a part time position. The previous board of commissioners, of which 4 are still commissioners today, decided that the growth and progress of Avery County was of high importance so they decided to hire a full time director. With the requirements of the position such as marketing the county, recruiting businesses, and attending local, regional and state functions, etc. the budget was increased. Additionally, 75 thousand dollars was approved for maintenance items needed on the AC PRIDE.

Now, it's important to note that even with the increase to the funding for the department, Economic Development is still less than 1 percent of the County's budget (.089% to be exact) and certainly not the reason taxes were increased as Mr. Griffith said during the December 2012 Commissioners Meeting. Lastly on the budget, every dollar in every line item was approved by the Commissioners, County manager and County finance officer during the budget cycle and the department is under budget in every category.

Second - the "incentive fund" was questioned by Mr. Griffith. The incentive fund has been in

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place since before I became the director and it's there to use to entice job opportunities to our county or assist current employers with expansion. In all cases, no monies would be used out of this fund unless they were pre-approved by the County Manager and Commissioners and certainly after a public hearing.

Third - Mr. Griffith said, and I quote, "He is 56% over his travel budget. I cannot find in the minutes where he requested a budget amendment to cover the additional travel expenditures" End Quote. The truth is I'm not over budget and currently am at only 60.8% of the Travel budget according to our finance office.

Fourth - Regarding Marketing. Mr. Griffith states and I quote again, "So far advertising has only included lip balm and bicycle tourism conventions in Chicago, Washington and Las Vegas. Not one single penny of advertising money has been used to promote the incubator. The \$2,469.83 worth of lip balm went to promote bicycling. The expenses for the conventions in Washington, Chicago and Las Vegas which cost us \$11,261.02 was for bicycling. He has spent approximately 1/3 of his advertising budget for bicycle conventions in Washington, Chicago and Las Vegas. End quote.

The truth is. I did attend the Interbike show in Las Vegas. Interbike is the world's largest cycling trade show. I attended because one of the very first items the County manager told me we needed to get in front of was cycling tourism. It's something that is happening in Avery County and it was suggested that we lead on this issue. Why, well the following statistics should help.

A 2009 study by the League of American Bicyclists found, "the national bicycling industry contributes an estimated \$133 billion a year to the U.S. economy. It supports nearly 1.1 million jobs and generates \$17.7 billion in federal, state, and local taxes. Another \$46.9 billion is spent on meals, transportation, lodging, gifts and entertainment during bike trips and tours.

Additionally, Appalachian State University in a 2012 study on the Economic Impact of Blood, Sweat, and Gears on the High Country's Economy found the total economic impact of the one day event is \$594 thousand with an additional impact of \$289 thousand from training rides.

So, yes I proudly attended the show and marketed Avery County for cycling tourism as well as made contacts with several cycling related businesses to introduce them to our County and ask them to consider Avery County for manufacturing or testing of their products in our mountains. To help market the County at these trade shows I created items to show who we are as well as items to attract people to our booth. Banner stands were created using photography of some of our areas attractions and lip balm was created with the Avery County logo and our web address on it as any time you operate a booth at a trade show you have to be able to get your contact information to the people in a fun, memorable manner. And once you clip your information to a person it makes it hard for them to forget you. Additionally, I am thankful for the Avery County Chamber for providing tourism brochures and other marketing materials for me to disseminate and Carolina Mountain Life for the case of magazines on our wonderful area to give out to interested folks. And it's important for me to share that we had so much interest in our area that we gave away all the marketing materials we took.

The trips to Chicago and Washington D.C. are not bicycle conventions as described by Mr. Griffith but in fact are Travel and Adventure shows for people looking to find new places to vacation. These shows are high end shows where people pay up to \$15 at the door to enter. So these folks are very interested in discovering new places to visit and not just looking for the freebie handouts at the booths. At the Chicago show, not only did I have Chamber information and Carolina Mountain Life magazines but I also distributed magazines from our local real

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estate agents to help introduce folks to the wonderful housing opportunities that we have in our county. Many of these folks are looking for places to retire or buy a vacation home and what a unique opportunity for them to find their potential new home in a place they want to visit on vacation.

The last point I would like to make on these marketing trips is very simple. This is work. And I treat it as such. Not only do I work up until the day I leave, but as soon as I arrive at a location I have to haul all the gear and boxes of information to the convention center, set up the booth and get ready to work 10 to 12 hours a day on my feet. At the conclusion of the show I have to break down the booth, get everything together and make it to the airport to catch my flight. And I'm back in the office the next day. And I do this at my personal expense since I have to pay someone to take care of my dogs for me when I'm gone on County business.

Now let's transition to the business incubator. Again, there has been a tremendous amount of half-truths and lies told about the AC PRIDE so let me correct those with the facts.

First - The AC PRIDE was unanimously approved by the Commissioners at the January 3rd, 2012 Commissioners meeting. After that vote, I started working with the town of Banner Elk on creating the zoning to allow an incubator in the town. Included in that language is a comprehensive list of the types of businesses that are preapproved to be in the incubator. Any opportunity not included on the preapproval list must get a conditional use permit by the town of Banner Elk before joining the incubator. Anyone can find the list of these preapproved businesses by pulling up the zoning language, specifically section 922 on Incubators, on Banner Elks website. It's important to note here that the collaboration with Banner Elk to develop the zoning language took 9 months to complete.

After the zoning was created the Conditional Use Permit process began. At the request of the commissioners I gave County counsel the Conditional Use Permit paperwork at the October 2012 Commissioners meeting for her review. She returned the paperwork to me late December to move forward with. Therefore, the creation of the zoning language and review process from counsel totals 1 year of the creation time of the AC PRIDE.

As I started addressing the Conditional Use Permit this January, I knew of areas in which I lacked knowledge so I reached out to my contacts at the TVA economic development office for their help. They assisted with one of our issues and I was more than grateful when Joel Shipley from David Patrick Moses Architects reached out to me to offer their assistance - at no charge - to help us finish the Conditional Use Permit because they believe in this project and the growth of Avery County. I am pleased to say that with Joel's help the Conditional Use Permit has not only been finalized but turned in to Banner Elk and we've already met with the Preserve America Committee who unanimously approved of our plans and even started discussing ways in which they can offer marketing assistance to the PRIDE.

Second - I quote from Mr. Griffith's diatribe again, "Mr. Gardella continues not to follow requests from the Board. I am now reading word for word from the Avery County Commissioners Meeting January 24, 2012: The Board discussed the AC PRIDE project at the old Banner Elk School. They also discussed that the EDC Director must get assurances that the town of Banner Elk will give a variance and get the state and county inspectors in the building before any money is spent on this project." End quote. The assertion that I have not followed any request from this Board is 100% false. Not only did I meet with Tommy Burlison, the Avery County Inspections & Planning Department Director at the incubator to show him our vision but I have here in my possession a letter from Mr. Burlison dated February 22, 2012 in which Mr. Burlison lists the items that need to be addressed to bring the building up to current code

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requirements. I would like to point out that this letter was copied to the County Manager as well. Third - Mr. Griffith has questioned Lees McRae and Mayland providing advisors to the incubator and the cost involved. Mr. Robert Branch is the Director of the Small Business Center out of Mayland and he supports this project completely. As for the training that will be done through the Small Business Center Mr. Branch asked me to remind the Commissioners that the SBC is funded by the state legislature and that all business education services are provided at no cost. Regarding Lees McRae, I sit on the Business Advisory committee for the Business School and we've discussed using students in assisting/teaching/coaching the businesses in the incubator and again there would be no cost to do this.

Fourth - Mr. Griffith said and I quote, "All of the businesses that Mr. Gardella located for inclusion in the incubator are already operating in Avery County or were planning to open in Avery County. The High Country Press reported that the brewery is planning on locating in Banner Elk even without being subsidized by the incubator. This is not Economic Development. If anything, the incubator is harming economic development of the county." End quote. The truth is, neither of the businesses that signed letters of intent to join the incubator had a previous location and though the brewery does now, the cycle shop is no longer interested in joining the incubator because of the treatment to the brewery. Therefore, no harm was done to the economic development of the county until after that vote.

Lastly, Mr. Griffith has questioned why I haven't marketed the AC PRIDE. Well, it's quite simple. I can't market something until I know when it's going to be open. Once we have the fire suppression system and handicap accessible ramp scheduled will I know when our potential opening date will be. At that time I can market the PRIDE and we can start visiting with potential business owners who are interested in joining the incubator.

In closing I would like to say that there's been nothing secretive about this project as Mr. Griffith stated. In fact, a quick check by Matthew Hundley the journalist for the Avery Journal shows that since September 23, 2011 the incubator appears in 28 articles on their website alone. Now that I've provided these facts and information I want to also make it clear that I'm more than pleased to talk with anyone about economic development in Avery County at any time. I've personally approached Mr. Griffith on 4 occasions over the last 10 months to set up a meeting to discuss what we're doing and have been rebuffed. I'm also aware that other commissioners have approached him to visit with me but he refuses. Ladies and gentlemen, I work for all of Avery County. If any of you wish to discuss how we can move our County forward please don't hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully submitted.

Bret Gardella

Economic Development Director

Avery County North Carolina

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