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VIRGINIA ANNABLE | NEWS-TOPIC Douglas Guerra, owner of Douglas Sutom Painting, bought the former Jo Ja's gas station on U.S. 321-A this year only to find out it had old gas tanks that had to be removed — a costly process.

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EPA grant saves small business



Douglas Guerra saved his money for over a decade.

Year by year while building Douglas Custom Painting, he stashed his savings, waiting until he could buy his own building for his business.

Early this year, the time came. He bought the old Jo Ja's gas station on U.S. 321-A just north of Hudson for an affordable price and finally had a place to call his own.

"We always wanted to have our own building," Guerra said. "I used to rent all the time, but I think ... (owning) is a good opportunity for my business to grow."

Then the bottom fell out.

Two months after the deal closed, Guerra started getting letters from the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality. They said he had to clean up the property by removing two leftover underground gasoline tanks, which would cost tens of thousands of dollars.



(the property) was a good deal, but we didn't know what we were getting in to," Guerra said. He was really worried about it

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because we spent all our savings."

He'd been to the Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute's Small Business Center before for classes, so Guerra turned to the center for help. Director Ben Willis, who is also a Lenoir City Council member, was not hopeful.

"I was like, 'This is not good,' " Willis said, then asked Guerra, "Did you do due diligence?"

Guerra had bought the property for cash, and at a price so much lower than the tax value that he leaped at the opportunity without taking a second look.

Lucky for Guerra, Willis remembered the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grant that the city of Lenoir was awarded in 2018. The money is for the city to study and test properties for

contaminants to find potential brownfield properties, which are formal industrial or commercial properties that have the potential of contamination from previous uses, which creates a liability that often stops businesses from building on and using the properties. Willis thought the grant could be used to help.

Willis reached out to Greg Icenhour, vice president of Mid-Atlantic Associates, the engineering firm helping the city administer the grant, who found that the money could be used to remove the gas tanks. Willis called with the good news as soon as he found out, Guerra said.

"He said, 'I think you're a lucky man, we have some answers,'" Guerra said.

The grant is technically only for studying and testing water and soil on the properties but, as Icenhour told the EPA, the soil at Guerra's property couldn't be properly tested for contaminants without removing the tanks.

A few weeks ago, a large backhoe and heavy equipment were out at the property uncovering the large, metal tanks and hauling them away. Again, Guerra got lucky -- the tanks had no leaks, Willis said.

Most of the time there's some leakage -- like 90 percent of the time there's some residue and they rust and they leak and you have to do these monitoring wells, and it gets pricey," Willis said.

The NCDEQ is pleased with the cleanup, and Guerra's business is back on track, Guerra said.

"It was a blessing," he said.

Now, Guerra can focus on building his business the way he'd always dreamed. The property will have to be repaved since the ground was torn up to take up the tanks, but it's a small price to pay for a large problem to be solved, he said.

Willis said he plans to use the experience to form a new class at the small business center teaching business owners about brownfields and doing due diligence before buying property, so others don't end up in the situation Guerra found himself in.

"In some cases, it's way worse," Willis said. "There are some horror stories, and that would have crushed (Guerra) -- that would have crushed them."