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Governor's ESA Legislation Passes! Voucher Bill Passes Legislature

By Steve Hunley,
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True to his word on the campaign trail last year, Governor Bill Lee asked the Tennessee General Assembly to pass his Educational Savings Account bill to give Tennessee families and students a choice in their future. Those Republicans in the legislature who stuck with Governor Lee, like Speaker Pro Tem Bill Dunn of Knoxville, felt the sound and fury of numerous school boards across the state, less as advocates for students and children than as shills for teachers' unions. The National Education Association gave \$20 million in contributions to its favored candidates in 2016, while the American Federation of Teachers gave roughly \$12 million to its endorsed candidates. From 2017-2018, the NEA had spent more than \$19 million, while the American Federation of Teachers has spent in excess of \$10 million. It's not uncommon to see state organizations to spend liberally in local races, hoping to influence decisions on pensions and benefits, all of which are paid for by the taxpayers. In fact, legislators were besieged and lobbied by school board members whose association is funded entirely through taxpayer dollars. The politics



Bill Dunn, Speaker Pro Tem, makes a signal as the vote was being taken on the ESA bill in the state house last week as Speaker Glen Casada watches from the back. Chairman of the budget subcommittee Andy Holt is pictured on the left and Republican leader William Lamberth is on the right.

continues to swirl after a fierce fight inside the legislature. Knoxville County Board of Education member Jennifer Owen has issued a full-throated call for candidates to challenge those who did not hew to the line favored by the teachers' union. Patti Bounds is being urged to challenge Bill Dunn, the champion of choice for children in Tennessee, inside a Republican primary.

The ESA legislation approved by the Tennessee

General Assembly only affects those schools in three districts, including Shelby and Davidson counties that are failing. Knoxville has its own schools that are failing. Tara Scarlett, writing in the Nashville Tennessean noted "80% of our students graduated high school on time", but "this same report also shows that three out of four MNPS (Metro Nashville Public Schools) students did not score a 21 or higher on the ACT..."

That is the state's marker "and a widely accepted indicator of" both "college and career readiness. Ms. Scarlett's article grew even more alarming when she shared "the state assessment indicates 89% of our high school students are not proficient in grade level math, and 81% are not proficient in grade level English Language Arts. Tara Scarlett's article concluded as the Metro Nashville Public Schools continue to pass out diplomas "even as

our community is confronted with data that tells us only 25% of these students are actually ready for the next step." Scarlett ruefully noted the "reality is that the other 75% of MNPS students will likely struggle to find and keep a job that pays a living wage, or will spend their first year at college or university in remedial courses."

Those statistics are not confined to Davidson County and Nashville alone. Shelby County and

Knox County have their own problems which have never been spent out of existence by the public school system. By the reckoning of the Knox County School system, 89% of the students attending magnet schools here do not read at grade level proficiency. Then-Knox County Mayor Tim Burchett funded a heralded reading program that appeared to work until the school system larded it with teacher coaches to the point where educators were spending 60% of their time with coaches and only 40% with students. Burchett pulled back the special funding he had provided.

The teachers' union and their allies turned because it was the worst defeat they have suffered in the Tennessee General Assembly since both chambers have had Republican majorities. The only similar loss was when the teachers' union could not stall or defeat the education reform legislation sponsored by then-Governor Lamar Alexander. Considering the teachers and their unions have usually managed to have their way with issues involving charter schools and vouchers, it is all the more remarkable newcomer Bill Lee was the governor who made history in allowing families and students to have a choice in deciding their educational future.

Recode special meeting called, council members respond

By Mike Steely
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Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero has called a special city council meeting for Tuesday, May 14th, in the main assembly room of the City-Council Building. The initial notification, sent to members of the council, makes no mention of Recode but that's the purpose of the 3 p.m. meeting. It appears the mayor is calling for the first of two votes on a complete revamping of the city's zoning regulations, building specifications, and other changes to planning rules. The entire one-page notice for the meeting puts every word in capital letters.

AN ORDINANCE OF THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF KNOXVILLE TO REGULATE THE LOCATION, HEIGHT, BULK, NUMBER OF STORIES AND SIZE OF BUILDINGS AND OTHER STRUCTURES, THE PERCENTAGE OF THE LOT WHICH MAY BE OCCUPIED, THE SIZE OF YARDS, COURTS AND

OTHER OPEN SPACES, THE DENSITY OF POPULATION AND THE USE OF BUILDINGS, STRUCTURES AND LAND FOR TRADE, INDUSTRY, RESIDENCE, RECREATION, PUBLIC ACTIVITIES AND OTHER PURPOSES, AND FOR SUCH PURPOSES TO DIVIDE THE MUNICIPALITY INTO DISTRICTS OR ZONES OF SUCH NUMBER, SHAPE AND AREA AS MAY BE DETERMINED, AND REGULATE THE ERECTION, CONSTRUCTION, RECONSTRUCTION, ALTERATION AND USE OF BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES AND THE USE OF LAND."

The notice also includes the repeal of Ordinance No. 3369 and all amendments attached to it and adds the enforcement and penalties for violation of the new ordinance.

The Focus asked the mayor's office and Vice-Mayor Finbar Saunders about the special meeting notice and both answered "Recode."

Planning Director Gerald Green had promised the fifth draft of the new regulations prior to the called meeting. Apparently this fifth draft of the 250-plus pages was sent to council members last week.

Several council members have asked, "Why the rush to adopt Recode?" and it is not certain that the final version will be adopted.

Opponents of the huge changes are planning to speak against them.

"That's outrageous," Larry Silverstein, of Community Form, told The Focus, adding, "I don't know if it can be stopped or stopped before the 14th."

The Planning Commission approved the changes back in January and several public meetings have been held, with some changes to Recode made during the months since, including three council work sessions. The fifth, and possibly final version is evolving and, as proponents contend,

so will the Recode effort if adopted. It appears that some council members want more time to review the proposal.

The Focus asked all the city council members to comment. Their comments appear in the order in which they were received.

Councilman George Wallace said, "Generally I'm in favor of Recode but we have not seen the final draft or the final map. There are too many unknown variables at this point to commit whether I'll be ready to vote on it on May 14th. We need adequate time and the public needs adequate time to review the final drafts."

Councilman Andrew Roberts told The Focus, "As I stated in the last workshop, I believe that both Council and the public need adequate time to review the changes in the 5th draft prior to a vote on the matter. I wanted the public to

'Final' draft of Recode regulations released

When the city council meets in a called session on May 14 they will have had two weeks to review what the planning commission staff has labeled as the "Final Recode Draft." That might be wishful thinking as several council members want more time to review the document.

The mayor's office is asking for public comments to be made by May 10 to be discussed at the called meeting.

For more information and to view the final draft ordinance and map, visit www.recodeknoxville.com. To submit comments or contact staff, send an email to recode@knoxplanning.org.

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