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Discussion of Board of Health on commission agenda

By Mike Steely
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Today will be a long day for the Knox County Commission with Chairman Larsen Jay and Commissioner Randy Smith starting the day with a 2 p.m. meeting to discuss commission operations and a 3 p.m. "practice session" for four new members.

There are 72 items on the Knox County Commission's 5 p.m. Work Session agenda with the highlight on

Commissioner Justin Biggs' push to name a non-medical citizen to the Knox County Board of Health. The law department has confirmed the commission may choose to add an additional member who is not a medical professional and Biggs is suggesting restaurant owner Randy Burleson for the position.

Burleson's various restaurants, among others, are named in a letter written by attorney Gregory Issacs to the Board of

Health threatening a lawsuit and demanding the lifting of restrictions on bars and restaurants. The resolution for the work session simply has a blank space where the new member's name would appear.

The commission may vote twice: once to authorize the new board member's position and then to name the citizen.

Another resolution that may be added to the agenda calls to limit the Board of

Health's more "stringent" regulations.

"It shall be the policy of Knox County to not arrest, cite or criminally prosecute Knox County Citizens for failure to comply with an order of the Board of Health," the proposed resolution reads and adds, "Knox County hereby adopts the 'Tennessee Pledge' as set forth by the governor."

If adopted the resolution would immediately take place, effectively nullifying

current regulations adopted by the Board of Health.

Among the various discussion items outside the normal business agenda is a discussion by Jay to create a special committee to study and evaluate the makeup and structure of the Knox County Sheriff's Merit System Council.

Chairman Jay also wants to talk about the makeup of various Knox County boards and committees and discuss planning the commission's

2020-2021 retreat.

Vice Chairman John Schoonmaker wants a discussion on the Ethics Committee's non-voting members.

Allowing amendments to the Zoning Ordinance to allow planned developments within the Rural Area Growth Policy Plan is a discussion sponsored by Commissioners Biggs, Jay and Kyle Ward and the Engineering and Public Works Department.

Area teams, fans reach Week 5

Members of the Fulton High School Color Guard wear masks as they present the colors of the national flag of the United States prior to Friday night's football game against Karns. A high school season that many thought would never get out of the starting gate because of the pandemic reached the midway point of the 2020 regular season last week. Please see prep football stories, scores and schedule in Sports and Recreation, Section B.

Photo by Cassie Vaughn / FUL.COM



PARC reports hurt by COVID-19, computer attack

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The Police Advisory and Review Committee usually gives a report of police statistics in its quarterly meetings but the 2020 second quarter information was not available when the group recently held its September meeting via Zoom.

The virtual meeting, telecast on Community TV, saw new Executive Director LaKenya Middlebrook attending her first meeting as well as new member Jenae Anderson Easterly. Four cases worked by the Knoxville Police Department's Internal Review Division were reported but the majority of the cases for April, May and June were apparently lost when the city was attacked with a ransomware computer virus.

The report to PARC included three city police officers being disciplined and one getting verbal counseling. Complaints included incidents during traffic stops and racial profiling. PARC heard that eleven cases took place during the quarter with four cases closed and seven cases still pending because of the city's computer attack.

Various members of the committee read reports but PARC member Jered Croom lost his microphone connection so Middlebrook read the rest of his report until Croom could be heard again.

Sergeant Sammy Shaffer gave the committee a review of police recruit training and he and Chief Eve Thomas answered questions from the members.

Croom asked about the use of force and de-escalation protocols and whether the training continues after a recruit becomes an officer. He asked if officers are taught to use "chokeholds."

Shaffer said that all recruits undergo a background check by Internal Affairs and that the chokeholds restricting oxygen and blood flow have been discontinued.

Easterly asked about cultural competence training and the response was that all cultures, demographics, etc. are taught as bias training that includes a panel with community leaders and PARC.

Chief Thomas announced that the body camera contract is complete and the department is waiting on the supply company to arrive and train the officers.

"Initially we'll have 50 cameras out there and plan to order more," she said. She said that Shaffer has been recognized by Homeland Security as an "outstanding responder."

Thomas also spoke about the department's new regulations involving the "Duty to intervene" when officers see another

All bars, restaurants serving alcohol must close at 11 p.m.

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In its previous meeting the Knox County Board of Health had considered completely lifting the 10 p.m. curfew on bars but the board reversed itself Wednesday. Although it stretched the curfew until 11 p.m. on a suggestion by Mayor Glenn Jacobs, the board voted to add all restaurants and bring-your-own establishments to the bar curfew.

The new regulation, which will run for 28 days, was promoted by Dr. Patrick O'Brien, a former bar owner, who said he visited the UT Strip over that past weekend and saw huge crowds in and around bars there long after the deadline.

"What I saw last weekend changed me from education to enforcement. We have to

deal with it now," O'Brien said.

Maria Hurt agreed, adding, "Education is not working."

With Dr. Martha Buchanan, director of the health department, reporting a large increase in new COVID-19 cases and three of her five benchmarks in "caution" or yellow and one in red, the board voted 8-1 to expand the curfew and stipulate that both bars and restaurants close their doors at 11 p.m. Mayor Jacobs, who said he appreciated the board allowing one extra hour of alcohol service, voted "No" on the issue.

The board also voted to limit crowd size in any alcohol-serving establishment of 900 square feet or less to 25 customers with only Jacobs in opposition. That regulation will run for the next two weeks.

For months the sheriff has said he would not get involved. Wednesday Knoxville Mayor Indya Kincannon and Police Chief Eve Thomas visited the virtual board meeting and pledged to enforce the regulations. County Mayor Jacobs said city enforcement at bars could cause "confrontation between the police and the public" and added "people having to comply is not good public policy."

While Dr. Buchanan said that most restaurant and bar owners are cooperating there are two bars that are not. With no teeth in enforcing the rules, the Board of Health appeared powerless to implement the rules.

Mayor Kincannon said, "The city is ready and willing" to enforce the regulations with citations. Chief Thomas said she is "hoping

for some direction from the board." Kincannon praised the board's mask mandate. Chief Thomas said she is meeting with the campus police and county sheriff's departments to discuss enforcement.

Kincannon said that UT students shop and go out into the city and can spread COVID-19 to older citizens, adding, "Now is the time to take further actions" and said the police, codes enforcement and even the fire department will help with enforcement.

Board attorney David Sanders said that a violation could include a misdemeanor charge with a penalty of 30 days in jail or a \$50 fine. University of Tennessee Chancellor Donde Lee Plowman had initially asked the city to close the bars

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