

New majority rescinds district representation, board expansion



Rogers



Keuhler

Board recalls disclosure forms

By Ritchie E. Starnes

MONROE - With a new Union County Board of Commissioners' majority intact, the panel rescinded the previous majority's efforts to request that the state help create district representation and expand the number of commissioners.

For the second straight commissioners' election a new board majority that includes two newly elected officials rescinded a previous commissioners' majority decision. Recently elected Republican commissioners Kim Rogers and Tracy Kuehler took their oaths Monday night (Dec. 1) for their meeting debut. They later joined newly anointed board chairman Lanny Openshaw in a 3-2 vote to approve a resolution that stops the General Assembly from making any changes to the board composition. A second split vote rescinded previous instructions given to staff on May 19 that the county work with state legislators amid efforts to expand the number of commissioners.

The new majority made it clear that they are not necessarily opposed to district representation or changes in the board's composition, but they object to allowing the state to dictate those changes.

"I'm not opposed to changes, but I'm opposed to Raleigh telling us....," said Rogers, whom the board unanimously elected as the new vice chairman.

Kuehler concurred with the opposition of the General Assembly getting involved.

"Raleigh doesn't know the day to day happenings in Union County," Keuhler said. "Let us find out what's best for Union County not having it done for us."

Dissenting commissioners Allan Baucom and Parker Mills attempted to appeal to the majority's willingness to explore district representation and/or board expansion. Baucom preferred that the new majority offer an alternative before a vote on the reversal. His insistence prompted the first contentious comments of the meeting.

"So you want board expansion by any means?" Kuehler said.

Despite district representation failing by referendum in 2007, the previous board majority created a swirl of controversy by voting to seek the state's help with creating districts and expanding the number of commissioners to as many as nine. The vote came on the heels of primary victories by Rogers and Kuehler, prompting some to call the request a move to maintain board control.

In another revisited agenda item that could result in reversal, the new majority requested that the legal staff work to create a "conflict of interest" form for county board applicants. Mills presented the fiercest opposition as he touted a variety of problems with the implementation.

"There isn't any kind of enforcement," Mills said. "Who's the gatekeeper?"

"I think it would be a mistake to pick and choose a board," he added.

Mills asked that the matter be put to a public hearing.

"This is something that I heard loud and clear on the campaign trail," Rogers said. "I don't need a public hearing."

In efforts to promote government transparency, the board unanimously voted to request that staff research the feasibility of televising other county board meetings, such as the Planning Board, Board of Equalization and Review, and the Board of Adjustment.

"Those (Board of Adjustment) are tough to find," Openshaw said. "I have to hear about those after the fact."

The board also unanimously voted to create a citizen notification email list so residents could stay abreast of issues at no expense.

"I'd like to see us make as much information as possible to as many people as possible," Openshaw said.

Though Baucom expressed concerns about burdensome meetings, the board agreed to reach out to the county's 14 municipalities with plans for future joint meetings. Baucom also represented the lone dissenting vote to making a standing work session every second Wednesday of the month from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

When Baucom and Mills joined Openshaw as newly elected commissioners in 2006, a new majority reversed a prior decision that granted Wesley Chapel extra territorial jurisdiction, or ETJ. Baucom, Mills, and Kevin Pressley rescinded ETJ with Openshaw and Roger Lane dissenting. A Superior Court judge later sided with the county with a ruling that Wesley Chapel officials had erred with its implementation of ETJ.

In other news, Register of Deeds Crystal Crump and Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisor James Johnson were sworn into their respective second terms.