

Biggest fundraiser won't appear on ballot for governor, Congress

Early voting is underway in the primaries for the special election in the 7th Congressional District and after a long period of limited activity, the 2026 governor's race is starting to show signs of life. But the highest-dollar single event was in honor of someone who isn't currently seeking a step up the political ladder: House Speaker Cameron Sexton.

Sexton held a fundraiser at the governor's mansion in Nashville on Wednesday that netted the Crossville Republican \$1.1 million. By comparison, U.S. Rep. John Rose collected a similar amount for his gubernatorial campaign over an entire quarter — though he loaned his bid another \$5 million. GOP rivals Marsha Blackburn and Monty Fritts won't have to file reports until January.

Most 7th District candidates will make their first disclosures next week, though the accelerated nature of the special election means they aren't likely going to report eye-popping totals beyond what they might give to their own campaigns.

Sexton is set to complete his third full term as House speaker next year (he was also in charge for a single session in 2020 upon taking over after Rep. Glen Casada's resignation). Sexton is sitting out both the gubernatorial campaign and the race to succeed Rose in Congress.

When the late state Sen. Jerry Cooper, a Morrison Democrat who headed the influential Commerce Committee, was making an unsuccessful bid for Congress in 1998, he was fond of jokingly asking lobbyists: What do you call a defeated congressional candidate? Answer: Chairman. Blackburn has similar arguments to make to her large roster of donors on the federal side of the ledger. After all, even if her gubernatorial aspirations don't work out, she will still have four years left on her second term in the U.S. Senate.

Endorsement bingo. Turnout is key to every election. But the 7th District contest brings with it all sorts of uncertainty about who will actually make the trip to the polls. Just as fundraising has presented a challenge, the respective campaigns also likely won't have the use of a finely tuned get-out-the-vote effort. So they are relying on advertising, forums and statements of support to make their case. Here is a look at some of the key endorsements :

- *Republican Rep. Jody Barrett of Dickson:* U.S. House Freedom Caucus, Former Gen. Michael Flynn, country star John Rich, Tennessee Stands founder Gary Humble, America First Insight, UFC champion Tito Ortiz.
- *Democratic Rep. Aftyn Behn of Nashville:* Progressive Democrats of America, Indivisible, Tennessee College Democrats, Her Bold Move.
- *Republican Rep. Gino Bulso of Brentwood:* NASCAR legend Darrell Waltrip, state Rep. Jay Reedy of Erin.
- *Democratic Rep. Vincent Dixie of Nashville:* Former Nashville Mayor Karl Dean, state Reps. Jessie Chism, Ronnie Glynn, Yusuf Hakeem, G.A. Hardaway, Sam McKenzie, Justin Pearson and Joe Towns, plus several Metro Nashville council members and local officials.
- *Democrat Darden Copeland, the founder of a public relations company:* A spokesman said he "isn't seeking political endorsements or accepting corporate PAC money."
- *Republican businessman Mason Foley:* None listed on campaign website or in press releases.
- *Democratic Rep. Bo Mitchell of Nashville:* Former U.S. Reps. John Tanner of Union City and Bob Clement of Nashville, state Sen. Heidi Campbell and the locals of the Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, Iron Workers, Plumbers and Pipefitters, Teamsters and Firefighters unions.
- *Republican Rep. Lee Reeves of Franklin:* State Senate Republican leader Jack Johnson of Franklin, GOPAC, all seven Williamson County mayors, Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs, state Reps. Jake McCalmon of Franklin, Aron Maberry of Clarksville and Jeremy Faison of Cosby.
- *Republican Matt Van Epps, a former General Services commissioner:* Former U.S. Rep. Mark Green of Clarksville, U.S. Rep. Jim Jordan, former Gov. Bill Haslam, former auto magnate Lee Beaman, the Patriot Fund, businessman Andy Miller Jr. of Murfreesboro.

Media race. Candidates and outside groups are ramping up their TV, cable, radio and streaming buys as early voting gets underway. According to AdImpact, the latest totals are \$286,000 by the Van Epps-supporting American Liberty Foundation, \$274,000 by the Barrett-opposing School Freedom Fund, \$238,000 by Reeves, \$210,000

by Foley, \$117,000 by Barrett-backing House Freedom Action, \$116,000 by Bulso and \$102,000 for Van Epps.

Internal poll. House Freedom Action, which is backing Barrett in the Republican primary, said its preferred candidate has nearly doubled his support since the beginning of the month in its tracking poll. But the survey of 322 people found three in four respondents were still undecided. The polling memo didn't give a margin of error.

According to the internal poll, Barrett's backing went to 11% from 5.5%, while Van Epps moved to 4.7% from 3.6%. The survey found Reeves' support dropped to 3.4% from 4.9% and Bulso fell to 3% from 4.3%.

"The anti-Barrett ad barrage makes this race a binary choice: Jody Barrett, or someone else," the memo concluded, adding that Epps, Reeves and Bulso want that latter status."

We're No. 2! Republican voters in the 7th District have become accustomed to being inundated by a variety of text-messaged polls about the race. Some operatives joke that one of the anonymous surveys' aims might be just to rattle opponents by testing outlandish attacks.

Most of the questionnaires boil down to trying to get respondents to give an answer other than "undecided" about whom they plan to vote for. A new poll this week took a novel tack, asking about who their "next pick" would be if they had to make a second choice on the GOP ballot.

The speaker and me. Reeves put out a press release the day after the fatal shooting of Charlie Kirk to announce that he and House Speaker Cameron Sexton had issued a proclamation honoring the conservative activist's life. While it's true that the document bears the speaker's signature, so do all proclamations issued on behalf of the chamber's membership. In other words, Sexton didn't have any special role in producing the document. The speaker has not endorsed any of the three Republican House members running in the special election — or anyone else.

Semi-forum. At the Tennessee Lobbyists Association annual meeting in Memphis, a gubernatorial forum was attended by Democrat Jerri Green and Republican campaign staffers Abigail Sigler for Blackburn and Chris Devaney for Rose. Nobody appeared on behalf of state Rep. Monty Fritts, who joined the race earlier this month.

Fire-and-brimstone platform. Asked to deliver a prayer before a joint subcommittee of Government Operations hearing this week, Fritts intoned: "Help us, God, to remember that you have called us to charge the gates of hell for every Tennessean." The invocation was nothing if not on-brand for Fritts, who has famously called on Gov. Bill Lee's legislative liaisons to "repent" for "acting in the spirit of Jezebel" in defeating his bills.

Straw Wars. After a Germantown straw poll showed Blackburn trouncing Rose, the congressman's camp was quick to point out that he was the overwhelming choice in Lewis County — and that Blackburn had even finished behind Fritts. What does it mean in the greater electoral picture? Not much. But the campaigns can't help but put much weight on their wins, while brushing off any losses.

Succeeding Kane. Commissioner Kim Frazier announced she is joining the Republican race to succeed

term-limited Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs. She joins a primary field that includes fellow Commissioner Larsen Jay and school board member Betsy Henderson. Jay, who launched his campaign last year, has raised more than \$542,000 so far and had \$371,100 on hand at the end of the last quarter. Frazier calls herself the "only true conservative" in the race, the Knoxville *Compass* reports. The primary is scheduled for May 5.

When Jacobs ran for his first term in 2018, he won a three-way Republican primary by 23 votes over his closest rival, former Commissioner Brad Anders.

Week in Review

Phoenix Solutions sentence, House budget hearings, chemtrails caucus

Here is a look at some of the top news emanating out of the Tennessee Capitol complex this week. For more details, visit [The Tennessee Journal-State Affairs](#) website:

A Phoenix resolution. Former top legislative aide Cade Cothren was sentenced Tuesday to two and a half years in prison following his conviction in the Phoenix Solutions case. U.S. District Judge Eli Richardson ruled that following his incarceration, Cothren will be subject to one year of supervised release and a \$25,000 fine.

Co-defendant Glen Casada, the former speaker of the Tennessee House, had been scheduled to be sentenced alongside his onetime chief of staff. But the slow pace of proceedings led Casada's hearing to be moved to Tuesday.

The presentencing report to the judge had recommended a prison term for Cothren of between 97 and 121 months. Richardson whittled the range down to 63 to 78 months before ultimately meting out 30 months behind bars. The downward departure recognized that "there is a continuum of how bad bribery is," Richardson said.

While Casada was found guilty of fewer counts, the former speaker's recommended sentencing range of 121 to 151 months was longer than Cothren's.

Wildcat budget hearings are back. For more than 20 years, the governor's office has held public budget hearings with state agencies as part of its development of the annual state spending plan. In 2019, the House Finance Committee started holding its own set of hearings as part of the trend of the Legislature taking more of an active role.

Rep. Gary Hicks, a Rogersville Republican who was promoted to chair the Finance Committee earlier this year, is reviving the practice this fall. He has scheduled two days of budget hearings starting on Oct. 28 involving most state agencies. The governor's set of hearings are expected to follow in November.

Be more like this other takeover target. The state is currently in court to try to resurrect a 2023 state law aimed at wresting appointment power to the Metro Nashville Airport Authority from the mayor and giving it to the governor and speakers of the House and Senate.

But that didn't stop House Speaker Cameron Sexton, R-Crossville, from advising the new East Bank Development Authority in Nashville to act more like the airport board. Sexton has expressed frustration at the lack of inde-

Tennessee News Digest

- The state's general fund revenues beat projections by \$8 million in the first month of the budget year. Sales taxes, which account for three out of every four dollars collected for the general fund, were up by \$63 million, or 5.2%, over the same month last year, while corporate franchise and excise taxes fell by \$9.6 million, or 24%.
- Waymo and Lyft are teaming up to bring autonomous robotaxis to Nashville. The ser-

vice is scheduled to begin accepting riders next year. Waymo has similar deals with Uber in Atlanta and Austin and with plans to expand to a half-dozen cities soon.

- The Knoxville City Council voted to authorize Mayor Indya Kincannon to apply for a \$1 million grant from the Federal Highway Administration to study a replacement for the Gay Street Bridge, which was closed to vehicular traffic for safety reasons last year. The

127-year-old span carried about 7,000 vehicles per day over the Tennessee River.

- Volkswagen made what it described as its last and best offer to the United Auto Workers at its plant in Chattanooga. The UAW won its first union election at a foreign automaker in the South in 2024, but negotiations have yet to result in a contract. Under the company proposal, workers' wages would rise by 20% over four years.
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pendence exerted by the panel tasked with managing the development of the area across the river from Nashville's tourist district, especially as it relates to finalizing a site for a new Tennessee Performing Arts Center.

A Fair assessment? Comptroller Jason Mumpower's office has pinpointed conflict-of-interest concerns over the makeup of the State Fair and Exposition Commission. According to an audit, the chair of the Tennessee State Fair Association also serves as president of Wilson County Promotions — which runs the annual event in Lebanon. Another seven people are officers for both entities.

Auditors suggested that lawmakers consider a change in state law to avoid potential conflicts in the future. Agriculture Commissioner Charlie Hatcher said confusion about oversight arose after the State Fair was moved from Nashville to Wilson County in 2021 and there was a steep increase in attendance and exhibits.

Here comes the chemtrails caucus. At an otherwise routine hearing on operations at the state Agriculture Department, a group of Republican lawmakers with particular concerns about "chemtrails" took over a good part of the discussion.

The conversation was kicked off by Rep. Monty Fritts of Kingston, a recent entrant into the Republican gubernatorial primary and the House sponsor of a law banning geoengineering and chemical releases in the skies above Tennessee. Sens. Janice Bowling of Tullahoma and Rusty Crowe of Johnson City soon joined the fray, with the latter wondering if he could submit samples to the state that he had taken off vehicles covered with what looked to him like "dirty rainwater" after a night without precipitation.

Obituary

John Petersen ruffled feathers at UT and with other state universities

John Petersen, who was president of the University of Tennessee system after a period of leadership scandals, [died on Sept. 11](#). He was 77.

A Los Angeles native, Petersen had a doctorate in chemistry. He came to UT in 2004 from the University of Connecticut, where he had been provost and executive vice president. The board of regents picked Petersen over two other finalists, one of whom Gov. Phil Bredesen expressed a "small preference" for. But the Democrat declared himself pleased with the outcome of the search.

Petersen followed John Schumaker, who had quit after

14 months as president amid criticism over lavish spending. Predecessor Wade Gilley lasted less than two years, resigning over a scandal involving a subordinate.

Petersen in 2005 hired David Millhorn, a Chattanooga native and decorated Vietnam veteran who had been the inaugural director of the Genome Research Institute at the University of Cincinnati. Petersen charged Millhorn with leading efforts to expand UT's overall research efforts, including within the school's partnership with Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Millhorn died in 2017.

During his time as president, Petersen ruffled feathers both within the UT system and among other schools under the Tennessee Higher Education Commission umbrella. Amid sluggish graduation rates at many of the state's public universities, Petersen floated the idea that THEC move to a performance-based system, under which funding would no longer be based simply on enrollment. The missive was not well received.

It wasn't until after Petersen had left UT that Bredesen and successor Bill Haslam moved the state to a funding system based on graduation rates. Haslam's top higher education adviser was Randy Boyd, who is now in his second five-year term as UT president.

Petersen pushed to bring all of the UT system's campuses onto equal footing with the Knoxville flagship. Ongoing disagreements between Petersen and UTK Chancellor Lauren Crabtree became known among staffers as the "war in heaven." Crabtree ultimately resigned, resulting in a 2007 no-confidence vote for the president by the Knoxville faculty senate.

Petersen's wife, Carol, was barred from interacting with donors in 2008 after getting into an argument with the chair of the UT Alliance of Women Philanthropists over fundraising initiatives she called "too Knoxville-centric."

Despite an eroding relationship with the UT board, Petersen enjoyed strong bipartisan support among state lawmakers, including Senate Speaker Ron Ramsey, R-Blountville, and House Speaker Jimmy Naifeh, D-Covington.

Petersen stepped down in 2009 amid a five-year job performance review that was reported as not going well for the president. While declaring that the move was "my choice," he wasn't seen as having much of an alternative. He was given a \$410,000 severance package upon his departure.

After leaving UT, Petersen was the director of the RTP Solar Fuels Project and the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry.

Tennessee Notes & Quotes

■ Justice **Louis Brandeis** once wrote that ‘sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.’ ... The Founders, though, recognized the benefits of sometimes keeping window curtains closed. Indeed, secrecy at the Constitutional Convention helped facilitate the forming of our nation.” — *U.S. Circuit Judge **John Bush** of Kentucky in [an opinion](#) upholding a decision by District Judge **Eli Richardson** of Nashville to throw out a lawsuit challenging the Tennessee Judicial Advisory Commission’s decision to close public access to its meetings. Judges **Julia Gibbons** of Memphis and **Guy Cole** of Ohio concurred.*

■ HCA Healthcare cofounder **Tommy Frist Jr.** topped the Tennesseans on [Forbes’](#) list of the country’s richest people. He came in at No. 30 with \$32 billion. Former Pilot CEO and Cleveland Browns owner **Jimmy Haslam** was next at No. 153 with \$8.7 billion. His brother, former governor and Nashville Predators owner **Bill Haslam**, came in at No. 264 with \$5.7 billion. **Martha Ingram** and her family were ranked 261st with \$5.8 billion, while gambling machine maker **Jon Yarbrough** placed 280th with \$5.5 billion. The death of FedEx founder **Fred Smith** caused him to drop off the list. He was ranked No. 184 with \$6.7 billion last year. But Tennessee will soon add another one of the country’s wealthiest people as In-N-Out Burger President **Lynsi Snyder-Ellingson** has announced plans to move close to the fast-food chain’s new Franklin offices. She ranks 153rd with \$8.7 billion.

■ “Runways are FedEx, so Memphis is FedEx.” — *U.S. Rep. **Steve Cohen**, D-Memphis, in celebrating the start of a \$700 million overhaul of the continental United States’ busiest cargo airport. More than \$50 million in federal grants are going toward the project, including a \$5 million earmark from Cohen and Rep. **David Kustoff**, R-Memphis, for snow removal equipment.*

■ U.S. District Judge **Curtis Collier** [sentenced](#) **Garry Lebron Haynes** of Chattanooga to two years in prison for threatening to kill U.S. Rep. **Marjorie Taylor Greene**, R-Ga., and an unidentified U.S. senator.

■ Newly confirmed 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge **Whitney Hermandorfer** delivered the keynote address to the Nashville chapter of the Federalist Society’s annual dinner. **Braden Boucek** and **Mike Dunavant**, the respective nominees for U.S. attorney in Nashville and Memphis, delivered the prayer and pledge.

■ Gov. **Bill Lee** has named **Stuart McWhorter** as his chief deputy. McWhorter, who will remain as commissioner of economic and community development, succeeds **Butch Eley**, who is retiring from state government. Eley is also the former transportation commissioner. The deputy to the governor has traditionally served as a chief political and administrative advisor. The latter responsibility has since been spun off into a separate chief operating officer position, which is held by **Brandon Gibson**.

■ The Tennessee chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union has named **Miriam Nemeth** as its new executive director. Nemeth previously served as chief counsel

to Rights Behind Bars and as litigation director for the Advancement Project in Washington, D.C. She is also a former clerk for 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge **Ronald Gilman** of Memphis and a onetime attorney for the Highlander Research and Education Center. Nemeth succeeds **Phyllida Burlingame**, who has been the organization’s interim director since November.

■ “I’ve been asked to run for everything from governor to Senate. I got asked to run for District 7. But I think right now, I’m most effective with my voice being able to let millions of people know what’s really going on behind the scenes Down the road, I don’t know what I might wind up doing. I’ll do whatever the good Lord tells me to do.” — *Country musician **John Rich** to WTN-FM.*

■ A wreck on the access road to Nashville International Airport on Monday was blamed for kicking off an extensive period of gridlock that led to missed flights and stranded arriving passengers. It wasn’t until seven hours after the initial reports that traffic returned to normal. The airport cited heavier-than-usual demand for ride-share vehicles, along with a spike in traveling football fans and conventioners. The facility has a history of traffic problems that it is trying to alleviate by building a larger ring road and better access to and from the Interstate. Officials refused to answer [media questions](#) about the incident at a regularly scheduled board meeting on Wednesday.

■ State Department of Commerce and Insurance Commissioner **Carter Lawrence** announced that his agency had fired an employee for “bias and disregard” after social media posts over the assassination of **Charlie Kirk**.

■ **Elon Musk’s** xAI is leasing 552 acres near its super-computer site in Memphis to Chattanooga-based Seven States Power Corp. to operate a 100-megawatt solar farm.

■ “[Kent] Calfee is an idiot. Some of these guys are like potted plants.... But he’s our potted plant.” — *Then-Rep. **Robin Smith** in a text message exchange with **Cade Cothren** presented by federal prosecutors during the former House chief of staff’s sentencing hearing. **Marilyn Calfee**, the wife of the former Republican lawmaker from Kingston, testified on Cothren’s behalf.*

■ “Forty-five years ago, he started off as the caboose, I don’t know what that’s about, and now he’s the top.” — *President **Trump** about **Jim Vena**, the Union Pacific CEO who called for a National Guard deployment to Memphis.*

■ When **Trump** announced that Memphis would become the next city to have the National Guard deployed to support law enforcement efforts, he called it a “replica” of an ongoing effort in Washington.

■ Far from the more than 2,200 troops sent to the nation’s capital or the 4,000 deployed to Los Angeles, Gov. **Bill Lee** [said this week](#) that he wouldn’t send more Guard members to Memphis than the number of Tennessee Highway Patrol troopers he’s moved there. So about 150.

■ Feels like “replica” isn’t quite the right word. How about a diorama? Oh, we’ve got it. A miniature.